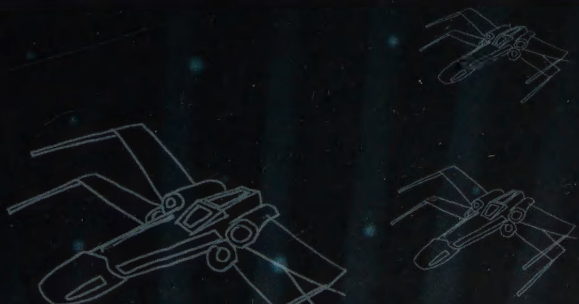


A GALAXY NOT SO FAR AWAY

WRITERS AND ARTISTS ON
25 YEARS OF STAR WARS



edited by

GLENN KENNY

A GALAXY NOT SO FAR AWAY

STAR BARS

A GALAXY NOT SO FAR AWAY

WRITERS AND ARTISTS ON TWENTY-FIVE YEARS OF
STAR WARS

Edited and with an introduction by
Glenn Kenny

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To the memory of my cousin,
Mark Anthony Relovsky, 1970-2002
—G. K.

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INTRODUCTION: JEDI MIND TRICKS

GLENN KENNY

1: THE DEATH STAR?

In the 1976 film *Network*, William Holden plays Max Schumacher, a veteran television executive who's kind of a last bastion of all those lost broadcasting virtues that the name Edward R. Murrow is regularly trotted out to signify. Schumacher wages a losing battle against declining standards and increasing crassness in TV programming, eventually losing his job for his troubles. This simultaneously prescient and facile satire, written by Paddy Chayefsky and directed by Sidney Lumet, presents Schumacher as a surrogate for the audience—we're meant to feel his frustration and bemoan the imminent death of all the dying values he cherishes. But Chayefsky cannily complicates things by having the aging Max, a married man in the throes, it could be said, of "male menopause" (boy, you don't really hear that phrase too much these days, do you?), fall in love with—or, rather, succumb to the blandishments of—much younger executive Diane Christensen. Venal, hyper, ratings-obsessed, and much more, Christensen is to Schumacher what Charles Foster Kane said he wanted to be to Walter P. Thatcher—"everything you

hate." But she's a gurl, and she's played by Faye Dunaway, and Schumacher is going through male menopause, so, you know.

While his best friend, newscaster turned "mad prophet of the airwaves" Howard Beale, is creating a nationwide sensation—and greatly propelling Diane's career trajectory—by going koo-koo for Cocoa Puffs on the air, Schumacher decides to come clean to his wife. Mrs. Schumacher (played by Beatrice Straight, who won a Best Supporting Actress Oscar for her work, which comprises less than four minutes of screen time) has a big go-to-pieces moment, but soon manages to compose herself and asks Schumacher what exactly the deal is with this broad (actually, she doesn't ask, but Schumacher is in such a haze over how he, a man of substance, could have possibly been seduced by such a creature that he can't stop himself from conducting this inquiry in front of the woman he's abandoning). And he basically denounces her and all those of her generation, describing her as "a creature of television." "She learned about life," he practically spits, such is his bitterness, "from Bugs Bunny."

Whoa. I was about sixteen when I saw *Network*, not old enough to really wrap my head around the whole *if-Max-doesn't-even-like-this-woman-how-come-he's-leaving-his-wife-for-her* conundrum (don't worry, I'd learn). Still for most of the movie I was pretty much with the character's program. But I mean, why Bugs Bunny? *Looney Tunes* and *Merrie Melodies* were *awesome*, and here was their most beloved character being dragged into the film's argument to stand in for all the forces that, the movie would have us believe, were about to topple Western Civilization as we knew it and as Edward R. Murrow liked it. And in fact the line still gets my back up. What the hell did Bugs Bunny ever do to Paddy Chayefsky, anyway?

I can only imagine that motion picture enthusiasts younger than I must feel a similar indignation when they dip into, say, Peter Biskind's *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls* or David Thomson's *Biographical Dictionary of Film*, and discover that *Star Wars* killed the movies.

A perhaps dispiriting state of affairs to contemplate, seeing as we live in a world where *Star Wars* is, basically, everywhere. It started out with one movie George Lucas directed in 1977 and has since expanded into a fictional universe. Five features of a proposed six-movie cycle (at one point it was going to be nine, but with Lucas approaching his sixties that seems less and less likely) have been produced thus far. They've made Lucas himself rich beyond his wildest dreams (or maybe not; this is a guy who once boasted to his bossy dad that he'd be a millionaire by the time he was thirty) and he has since put the money he's made from *Star Wars* into what amounts to his own moviemaking empire. I bet that most reasonably comfortable, reasonably media-savvy Americans don't go through a single day without hearing some passing *Star Wars* reference, in conversation or over the television or radio, or without seeing some ad or headline or Internet graphic that refers to it, or without coming upon a piece of *Star Wars*-related merchandise—book, comic, coffee mug, what have you. (Several examples of how *Star Wars* references can be folded into just about any disquisition on any topic can be found in the "Miscellany" at the end of this book.) I suppose for guys like Thomson and Biskind, it must be really fucking irritating. For everybody else, including many of the writers in this book—there are a few who don't remember a world before *Star Wars* existed—to them, it just is. At least at first—obviously, it's not the case for those who, in the pages that follow, reflect upon the effect that the *Star Wars* phenomenon has had on their own lives.

Actually, for Thomson—who is, or was, let me get this out of the way right off the bat, one of the finest film critics in the country or, for that matter, the world—George Lucas's friend and sometime collaborator Steven Spielberg is more of a *bête noire*, but that may well be because he feels more engaged by Spielberg, feels Spielberg possesses a genuine talent that Spielberg's squandered in the service of a blockbuster-hungry Mammon that he and Lucas helped re-create. But, boy, does that Steven ever piss Thomson off. In his inaugural column for *Esquire* back in 1996, cheerily entitled "Who

Killed the Movies?" he wrote of Spielberg: "Even the gravity of *Schindler's List* is like the most popular kid in school taking advantage of his status to recommend education. That's cool. We all know he's the quarterback, too, one heck of a dancer, and—hey! fun! Didn't he make *Jurassic Park* at the same time as *Schindler's List*, just to prove he wasn't one of those dudes who couldn't concentrate?" Only someone who wasn't brought up in the American education system—British-born Thomson now lives in the U.S.—could possibly mistake Steven Spielberg for a quarterback.

When Thomson tackles Lucas in his *Biographical Dictionary of Film*, his palpable distaste for Lucas leads to some fairly wacky pronouncements; of the characters in *Star Wars*, he says, "its people are raised on junk food; they are pink, puffy and anonymous." Perhaps Lucas could have avoided the "pink" problem had he paid more attention to the color timing. Thomson goes on: "Good and evil are reduced to the level of opposing sides in electronic Ping-Pong." As opposed to the relative richness and complexity of a real game of Ping-Pong, I suppose. The usually persuasive Thomson's terminology, the implied eye-rolling over junk food and video games, really give him away here; not to put too fine a point on it, but he basically starts to stink of old-fartdom. Not that I'm a huge fan of such modern or postmodern phenoms as junk food and electronic Ping-Pong myself, but, you know, get over it, Dad. Because when you come right down to it, so many *Star Wars* haters of a certain age won't, or can't, engage *Star Wars* on its own terms; they engage it, rather, as the grave marker for their own glorious youth. It echoes an argument you hear a lot when you talk or read about rock and roll. John Lennon's "Elvis died when he joined the army" remark was the first, and most genuinely provocative, of such throwdowns. They've been coming fast and furious ever since. Kevin Kline's character in *The Big Chill* has a much quoted "no good music since year X" line that I can't bring myself to cite accurately, as it would mean looking at the movie again; but wait, there's critic Jim Miller, in his book *Flowers in the Dustbin*, admitting that he basically lost interest after the Sex Pistols broke up; there's thousands of people

probably younger than me, and maybe you, for whom it all ended after Kurt Cobain killed himself; et cetera. My favorite curmudgeon in this respect is the writer Nick Tosches, who will sometimes argue that Elvis himself killed rock and roll, and who will then, elsewhere, extoll the virtues of the latest Iggy Pop release. (And just for the record, movie critics have been trumpeting the death of film since before sound actually, really, killed it.)

Contributor Tom Carson's piece in the January 2002 *Esquire*, entitled "McCabe and Mrs. Kael," beautifully sums up, then upends, the Thomson/Biskind version of history: "The larger fable goes like this: Once, we lived in movie paradise, with one bold masterpiece after another engrossing a public finally willing to grow up. Then George Lucas ruined everything by turning the audience infantile again, abetted by a craven industry that turned off the money tap for the visionaries as soon as the receipts for *Star Wars* rolled in.

"As a product of this era, I can say that just about the only part the myth gets right is that it really was a wonderful time to go to the movies—if, that is, you were part of the relative handful queuing up for *Mean Streets* rather than the hordes waiting to see *Airport*, *Earthquake*, *The Towering Inferno*, or *The Exorcist*. At the time, my friends and I knew we had to catch the movies we were excited about fast, before they flopped."

That lines up about right with my own experience of movie-going at the time. For me, *Star Wars* didn't register as an earth-shattering experience the first time I saw it; in fact, I didn't even actually see it until a couple of months after its May 1977 release. I saw it with my family while on a vacation at Virginia Beach. I thought it was kind of okay, having persuaded myself that I was pretty much over sci-fi movies at that point anyway. J. G. Ballard, writing about the movie in 1977, made an interesting point regarding just how sci-fi *Star Wars* really was in the first place: "*Star Wars* in particular seems designed to appeal to that huge untapped audience of people who have never read or been particularly interested in s-f but have absorbed its superficial ideas—space ships, ray guns,

blue corridors, the future as anything with a fin on it—from comic strips, TV shows like *Star Trek* and *Thunderbirds*, and the iconography of mass merchandising.” Or as one enthusiast of a certain age put it to me: “*Star Wars* actually was the movie we thought we were watching when we went to see those Flash Gordon serials.”

A movie I did rush to on opening day was Martin Scorsese’s *New York, New York*. At seventeen, I found many elements of its main-character romance a bit befuddling (*why are these two hanging out when they clearly can’t stand each other?*—don’t worry, I’d learn) but could congratulate myself on recognizing the bits of *mise-en-scène* that Scorsese had cribbed from Vincente Minnelli, master of Technicolor sumptuousness and father of the movie’s costar, Liza Minnelli. Early in Biskind’s chapter on *Star Wars*, incidentally, he discusses Lucas’s nervousness about releasing *Star Wars* in competition against a number of films, one of them being *New York, New York*. According to Biskind, Lucas’s then wife, Marcia, who had been the editor on Scorsese’s *Alice Doesn’t Live Here Anymore* and was working on *New York, New York*, at one point said to her husband, “*New York, New York* is a film for grown-ups, yours is ■ kid’s movie, and nobody’s going to take it seriously.” Strangely enough, Lucas remained married to Marcia for six years after she made this statement.

That’s where I was coming from. And for the next couple of years, that’s pretty much where I stayed—checking out Polanski double features at New York’s Cinema Village, getting into Fassbinder, and so on. The big-event movie of the summer of 1980 for me was not *The Empire Strikes Back* but *The Shining*, which I again saw opening day (and thus caught the four minutes of it that Kubrick demanded be cut from every print that very night). In fact, someone told me before I saw *Empire* that it turned out that Vader was Luke’s father. The fact that I found the idea a little preposterous—so many of the writers here responded to this revelation by more or less saying, “of course”—is a good indication of how unengaged I was.

But then I actually saw *Empire* and was surprised to find it

pretty damn compelling, and to find the Darth-as-Luke's-father gambit quite successfully pulled off. *Empire's* dialogue was a lot snappier than *Star Wars'* (I like to think that a lot of what I enjoyed in *Empire* was due to the participation of veteran screenwriter Leigh Brackett, whose contributions are discussed in Dan Barden's essay here and who made her bones writing sci-fi for the pulps), the varied planetary environments convincing, the increasingly interlacing plotlines intriguing. A really uncanny mixture of the dark and the *neat*, I thought. It made me a fan—a lowercase "f" fan, but a real enough one. Imagine how let down I felt by the preponderance of Ewoks in *Return of the Jedi* (although I knew wishy-washy things were in store when that movie's title was downgraded from *Revenge of the Jedi*).

But regardless of my, or any other critic's, level of engagement with the series, *Star Wars* made, and changed, movie and cultural history, and anybody who wants to make sense of either has to take it on. For the likes of Biskind and Thomson, *Star Wars* not only spoiled the party, it acted as a virus, seeking out and destroying all that was good and true and innovative; it literally blinded all those who came under its spell. Robert Altman, one of the gods, supposedly, of the pre-*Star Wars* second golden age of Hollywood, complains in Biskind's book that today there are no pictures in the multiplexes "that an intelligent person could say, 'Oh I want to see this,'" because of the blockbuster mentality *Star Wars* helped create. But Altman, and William Friedkin, and so many others who didn't become George Lucas are not renowned for their capacity for self-criticism; it's easier for them to point a finger at Spielberg and Lucas than to even conceive that their own indulgences helped destroy the cause of intelligent, mainstream American movie-making. I mean, did Altman make the unspeakable 1979 *Quintet* because someone put a gun to his head and told him "If you don't make a pretentious, incoherent sci-fi thriller that makes *Zardoz* look like . . . hmm, lemme see, that makes *Zardoz* look like *Star Wars*, I'm gonna blow your brains out"? No, I don't think it happened that way at all. Friedkin apparently bullied not one but two

major studios to make his highly misbegotten *Sorcerer*, a remake of *The Wages of Fear*—a picture that had gotten made, but good, the first time around. It was a debacle. These crap ideas were the filmmakers' own; they didn't come about because *Star Wars* poisoned the well.

Thomson complains that you couldn't get a film like *Taxi Driver* made in today's Hollywood. Well, then I suppose that we should be glad that it, too, got made when it did, but good. Still . . . *Star Wars* did change Hollywood moviemaking, but it's not a matter of content pure and simple. There are some irrefutable facts here. Mainstream movies today don't get—aren't given—much room to breathe; it's striking today to watch a movie like Paul Mazursky's 1978 *An Unmarried Woman*—not a big favorite of mine, or a picture I'm particularly eager to champion, mind you, but bear with me (and yes, I know it was released a year after *Star Wars*, but these things don't happen overnight)—and note just how relaxed it is in its storytelling, how unconcerned Mazursky is with moving the “plot” forward, as opposed to just letting his characters live on-screen. Similarly, another '70s film that's not routinely trotted out by the lamenters, Clint Eastwood's 1976 *The Outlaw Josey Wales*—which is a big favorite of mine, thanks for asking—has a feel as expansive as the big Western sky it's set under. Eastwood tells the story at a pace that lets its events resonate, as opposed to racing for the next set piece. One of Lucas's signature storytelling devices (which has its roots in D. W. Griffith's 1916 *Intolerance*) is the multiple climax wherein, in the last third or fourth of a given picture, four or so plotlines are resolved in action sequences. Sometimes these sequences are woven together tightly enough for the desired rousing effect (the final sequence of *A New Hope*, culminating with the destruction of the Death Star—it's a bit choppy, but it gets the job done; Irvin Kershner did even better with the capture of Han Solo, escape of Leia and company, and battle between Luke and Vader in *The Empire Strikes Back*). But sometimes they're constructed so rotely that the desired effect is merely the result of the audience's desire for said combined with the obvious signals that

this is where they should be cheering (that would be the decidedly underwhelming wrap-up of *The Phantom Menace*).

To digress just a little bit: When I was growing up, the movie that was the box office champ of all time was *The Sound of Music*, a movie that had been retitled *The Sound of Mucus* by the film's costar, Christopher Plummer (or so legend has it). Imagine how boys my age, or boys of any age for that matter, must have felt about the fact that this was the most successful motion picture of all time. It gets worse. The movie it supplanted was *Gone with the Wind*. Now granted, *GWTW* is a lavish production with a lot to recommend it, and its humongous popularity is a fascinating and useful and in some cases affection-inducing indicator of just how, um, conflicted U.S. culture is . . . but again, what we've got here is basically what many would term a chick flick with really spectacular Technicolor and gasp-inducing racist undertones or overtones or what have you. I mean, it's a trifle appalling. When *Star Wars* had the top box office spot (it is now occupied by *Titanic*, a movie that, if one looks at it a certain way, grafts *Gone With the Wind* to *Star Wars*, and leaves out the overt racism—I don't know, does Danny Nucci's Chico Marxesque Fabrizio qualify as a demeaning stereotype?), well, I'm sure that Thomson and Biskind et al. would, whenever researching such matters, react in a fashion similar to the way Dracula might recoil from a string of garlic plants; but still, to male movie lovers who grew up with *Creature Features* and *Chiller Theater* as opposed to *Million Dollar Movie*, seeing *Star Wars* occupy the top spot was a bit of a tonic. Even I, despite my detachment from the phenomenon, appreciated that. Sure, I would have preferred, say, *Alphaville* in its place, but, you know, eventually you grow up and realize that that's just not going to happen. (As James Wolcott put it in a *Vanity Fair* riposte to Thomson, "Critics need to get over themselves, and not treat the cinema as their personal cross.")

"*Star Wars* was the film that ate the heart and soul of Hollywood. It created the big-budget comic book mentality." That's Paul Schrader, quoted by Peter Biskind, in the epigraph to Biskind's

"Star Bucks" chapter of *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*. Biskind's book could easily be used to bolster the argument that one-time American cinematic heroes such as Schrader, Altman, Hal Ashby, Brian De Palma et al. did in fact all commit forms of career suicide. (In the late Ashby's case, we can add to that literal, albeit slow, suicide.) Unlike Thomson, who sounds like a spoilsport and who knows it, Biskind, a tireless interviewer and all-around canny individual, more often than not hands his subjects substantial lengths of rope and lets them do with it what they will. (Biskind's own critical take on *Star Wars* is fairly negative but somewhat dispassionate; his essay "The Last Crusade" in the out-of-print anthology *Seeing Through Movies* is a pretty sharp examination of the links between the Lucas-Spielberg worldview and Reaganism.) A particularly damning pronouncement from George Lucas features on the back of the hardcover edition's dust jacket: "Popcorn pictures have always ruled. Why do people go see them? Why is the public so stupid? That's not my fault." Oooff. Schrader's pronouncement does carry some weight, particularly if you put *Star Wars* up against the dreaded box office champions cited above. *The Sound of Music* and *Gone With the Wind* were monstrous, to be sure, but they were also sui generis. And there's the rub. Schrader is actually absolutely right, in a way. One would have had to have been a fool, even at the heyday of GWTW or *Music*'s popularity, to have attempted to pull that particular rabbit out of that particular hat again. (Actually, the fools at 20th Century Fox, which produced *Music*, did try; subsequent musicals like 1967's *Doctor Dolittle* nearly put the studio out of business.) What *Star Wars*, along with *Jaws*, did was provide a kind of template for what my former colleague Howard Karren (a brilliant film thinker who I wish did more writing) calls the "overdetermined" film. The movie wherein every emotional or visceral jolt is calculated like a point on a graph. Such movies do have their pleasures, of course; sitting through a well-made one can be as exhilarating as watching a flawlessly executed gymnastics routine (emphasis on the word "routine"; a case in point, incidentally, would be John McTiernan's morally dubious

but quite proficient *Die Hard*). But those don't happen too often, do they? Here's the deal: it's beside the point to complain that *Star Wars* created a Hollywood where *Taxi Driver* couldn't get made today. (And some would argue that making more *Taxi Drivers* is what the indie industry is for.) More germane is the fact that if *Star Wars* hadn't been made, then *Top Gun* could never have been made.

This is weird, because if you look at them side by side (and I don't recommend it), *Star Wars* and *Top Gun* don't seem terribly similar. As a visual storyteller, Lucas has always fancied himself a bit of a classicist. His cinematic god is Akira Kurosawa (Lucas recently endowed a facility at the USC film school with the proviso that the building bear Kurosawa's, and not Lucas's, name), and Kurosawa's idol was John Ford, that most seemingly foursquare (but in fact quite slyly innovative) motion picture tale-spinner. In the movies he's directed, Lucas doesn't handle the camera with anything like the grace with which Kurosawa and Ford did, but boy, can you see him trying. And one of the most weirdly charming things about the initial *Star Wars* movie, a stylistic tic that's been maintained throughout the series, is the use of that hoariest of transitional devices, the optical wipe. (If *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* seemed a trifle slow to contemporary audiences—and did it ever!—it was merely because Lucas himself hadn't been bothering to keep up with trends.)

Top Gun's visual style is all showy freneticism, but its narrative thrust, such as it is (so relentless that its makers had to basically invent a war to get to the dogfight climax), is pure *Jaws/Star Wars*. The visual effects of the film could certainly not have been so easily achieved without Lucas's example, either. But we also have to admit that it was the influence of MTV and video games that helped create this abomination. (Are you getting the idea that *Top Gun* is for me what *Star Wars* is for Thomson?) And indeed, there's a small school of thought that posits that it was MTV and video games that, in fact, killed the movies. But this book isn't about MTV and video games. Although one could argue that *Star Wars* has influenced those cultural phenomena as well. As I've

discovered while working on this book, if you think about *Star Wars* too much, you can get caught in a rather unpleasant cultural feedback loop. This could be the most diabolical Jedi Mind Trick of all.

2: PROMETHEUS BOUND

"If I hear about that screening of *Star Wars* one more time, about how everybody was trying to attack George . . . we were rooting for George a hundred percent." That's Brian De Palma, in an interview with Anne Thompson (*Premiere* magazine, September 1998), responding to what's probably the most famous set piece in *Easy Riders, Raging Bulls*, an account of a, in Biskind's telling, disastrous screening of a rough cut of *Star Wars*. At a dinner afterwards ("nobody touched the dumplings," one participant recalls), De Palma is quoted as asking Lucas, "Who are these fuzzy guys? Who are these guys dressed up as the Tin Man from Oz?" While De Palma doesn't out-and-out deny those quotes, he tells Thompson: "I've always had a, shall we say, cutting wit, but everybody who knows me knows I only have their best interest at heart." Fair enough. But it sure does make a far more compelling narrative if you say that after being taunted by many of his peers, and even by his own spouse, for goodness sake, George Lucas suddenly found himself, in the parlance of the movie that knocked *Star Wars* off of the top of the box office, the King of the World. (You remember *Titanic*, right?) He had cannily kept the merchandising rights to all the *Star Wars* characters, not that anyone had necessarily wanted them from him in the first place. They sure did after the movie exploded.

Up until that moment, Lucas's relations with mainstream Hollywood had been, shall we say, strained. Even though he had achieved a substantial box office success with his second fictional feature, 1973's *American Graffiti* (a picture that spun off, sort of, into another '70s cultural phenom, the '50s nostalgia sitcom

Happy Days—I say “sort of” because Lucas had nothing to do with *Happy Days*, but the show did feature *Graffiti* star Ron Howard in a somewhat similar role to his one in the film), he still nursed wounds from what he considered Warner Brothers’ mutilation of his first, the rather impenetrable sci-fi dystopia film *THX-1138*. Now Hollywood looked to him. But Lucas realized he didn’t have to deal with the type of people who would cut the fingers off his babies anymore. (That’s not my analogy, that’s his, talking to Biskind about what he went through on *THX*.) “I purchased my freedom from the machine,” Lucas told Anne Thompson in the May 1999 issue of *Premiere*. And in doing so he created his own empire. He built Skywalker Ranch, his own, more work-oriented version of Kane’s Xanadu. He created ILM, Industrial Light and Magic, the effects concern whose house style was immediately recognizable in scores of increasingly effects-driven movies. With pal Steven Spielberg he created another highly remunerative movie franchise, the Indiana Jones films. His conglomerate of companies includes one devoted to education—Lucas Learning.

He has devoted a considerable amount of effort to changing, for the better, the way we see movies. An audio whiz named Tomlinson Holman lent his name to Lucas’s THX (for Tomlinson Holman’s Experiment—Isn’t that cute?) system, which was designed to improve sound in movie theaters. In its early, heavily hyped days, the THX scheme was made much sport of; in one gag in what I recall was an *Animaniacs* cartoon, the “The audience is listening” tag that appeared as part of the very loud announcement that you were sitting in a THX-enhanced theater was changed to “The audience is now deaf.” (The very ingenious *Animaniacs* television show was, of course, executive-produced by frequent Lucas collaborator and co-ruiner of movies Spielberg, so this can be interpreted as a chummy bit of in-jokery.) In this dreadful 1990 Leslie Nielsen/Linda Blair/Ned Beatty-starring *Exorcist* parody called *Repossessed*, the letters of the THX logo are replaced with BFD, har de har har. In its early days, THX was intended as the launching pad for a whole slew of movie-watching enhancements; anybody who’s recently sat

in a multiplex while a movie's image is thrown by an extremely weak projector bulb can tell you the experiment hasn't wholly taken. (Which is probably why Lucas is, these days, so hot on digital video projection as well as digital video production. Talk about killing film—*Episode II: Attack of the Clones* was created entirely without the benefit of celluloid.) In any case, though, it's the work that was done by Lucas's crew that has, in large part, created the whole concept of home theater—surround sound, all that—that the kids are so crazy about today. Ah. George Lucas. Force for Good.

Having control of an empire gives Lucas the privilege that only emperors can enjoy: the privilege of rewriting history. When *Star Wars*, as it was called then, was released in 1977, its opening title crawl did not begin with *Episode IV: A New Hope*. That little bit was first added to the film for the 1979 theatrical rerelease, preparing fans for the imminent release of *Empire*. In 1997 Lucas unveiled "special editions" of the first three films of the trilogy, which were dutifully labeled Episodes IV, V, and VI; the viewing public of course sat still for this display of willful dyslexia, knowing that Episode I would follow in 1999. What some didn't sit still for was Lucas's tinkering with the notorious, and much beloved by fans, face-off between Han Solo and Greedo in the Mos Eisley cantina sequence of—all right, all right—*Episode IV: A New Hope*. Using digital technology, Lucas contrived to have Greedo shoot at Han first, thus recasting Han's under-the-table dispatching of the bounty hunter as an act of self-defense. Thus rendering Solo's charm a lot less, um, roguish. Why, for God's sake? "For the first time," Lucas told Anne Thompson apropos of his experience as a single father (he has three adopted children), "I've been able to see a child's reaction to what I'm doing." And, apparently, tailoring his work to those reactions, or second-guessing himself. This has already created, for longtime devotees, a disturbance in the Force. I recently got this e-mail from a friend in her twenties, addressed to

her “*Star Wars* buddies”: “So if you haven’t heard, *NSYNC has a ‘walk on’ part in *Star Wars II*. They will be Jedi Knights ‘in the background.’ They were offered the role after George Lucas’ daughter BEGGED him to cast her ‘favourite band’ in the film. She is ALSO the one responsible for Jar Jar Binks. She’s like Fredo Corleone, BAD for the family business.” (This friend is Canadian, in case you were wondering about that “favourite.”)

Take that, Lucas. To which Lucas might reply, “*Tant pis*. My galaxy, my rules.” (Well maybe he wouldn’t say “*tant pis*.” And as it turns out, the fan protests were heeded; the boy band has been purged from *Clones*.) And there are rules, and there is a continuity at work here. The cultural critic John Seabrook, writing first in the *New Yorker* and then in his book *NoBrow*, provides many fascinating glimpses into the workings of the empire Lucas employs to control his galaxy. “Everyone in the content-creating galaxy of *Star Wars* has a copy of ‘The Bible,’” Seabrook writes, “a burgeoning canonical document (currently a hundred and seventy pages long) that is maintained by ‘continuity experts’ Allan Kausch and Sue Rostoni. It is a chronology of all the events that have happened in the *Star Wars* universe, in all the films, books, CD-ROMs, Nintendo games, comic books, and role-playing guides, and each medium is seamlessly coordinated with the others.” It is from this “Bible,” of course, that the notorious 1978 *Star Wars* Christmas television special was purged; see the essays by Webster Younce and Tom Bissell in this volume. (And it’s rather amusing to note that, all this fuss notwithstanding, sometimes Lucas himself can’t keep things straight. In his audio commentary for the DVD of *Episode I: The Phantom Menace*, he for the most part “correctly” refers to his 1977 film as *A New Hope*. But once or twice he messes up and calls it *Star Wars*.)

Now Seabrook gets at least a couple of things wrong in his “The Empire Wins” chapter of *NoBrow*. He says *Star Wars*’ “light sabers and Jedi Knights were inspired by Akira Kurosawa’s *Hidden Fortress*.” I’d love it if he’d explain precisely how; I’ve watched *Hidden Fortress* a few times since reading that, and, well, no. Actually, what

Star Wars borrows most specifically from *Fortress* is the idea of an epic tale as seen through the eyes of two subordinate characters of dubious intelligence and/or efficacy; of course, *Fortress*'s R2 and 3PO figures are a couple of mercenary cowards who are idiots to boot, while *Star Wars*' robots are for the most part at least loyal, and in the case of 3PO, quite useful. (And yes, Lucas is borrowing from Kurosawa borrowing from Shakespeare here.) *Fortress* of course also boasts a headstrong Princess and a rough-and-ready samurai, loose potential prototypes for Leia and Han. But never mind.

Because Seabrook also grasps an essential point, accurately summing up Lucas as that most enviable of show business clichés (well, at least on the level of lifestyle), the victim-of-his-own-success. "Instead of gaining his independence with the success of *Star Wars*, Lucas had lost it," Seabrook says, having cited Lucas's stated counterculture-styled values and contrasted the innocence of the first *Star Wars* film with the marketing monolith the *Star Wars* franchise had since become. "This was the real lesson of *Star Wars*: In the end, the Empire wins." Purchasing your freedom from the machine, it turns out, means becoming another machine.

And in another way, the victory of the "Empire" is as much Lucas's own fault as anybody's. To wit: here's a guy at the command, basically, of his own studio, a vast technological apparatus, and what are the actual non-*Star Wars* movies that he's chosen to put that apparatus behind, the Indiana Jones movies and Francis Ford Coppola's *Tucker* aside? Um, 1986's *Howard the Duck*; 1994's *Radioland Murders*, for Christ's sake. If Lucas is the only person on Earth who could have made *Star Wars*, just as Disney was the only guy who could have created Mickey Mouse, maybe it's the case that he really can't do anything else.

3: THE FORCE IS WITH YOU, ALWAYS

"A refurbished *Star Wars* is on somewhere or everywhere. I have no intention of revisiting any galaxy. I shrivel inside each time it is mentioned. Twenty years ago, when the film was first shown, it had

a freshness, also a sense of moral good and fun. Then I began to be uneasy at the influence it might be having." So notes Sir Alec Guinness, the beloved portrayer of the beloved Obi-Wan Kenobi, in the last volume of his journals, *A Positively Final Appearance* (a quite congenial and enjoyable book, by the way). Guinness then goes on to tell of an encounter in San Francisco with a twelve-year-old who, his mother proudly boasted, had seen *Star Wars* (or *Episode IV: A New Hope*, or what have you) over a hundred times. Guinness burst the little boy's bubble by politely requesting that he never see the film again. The kid, understandably stunned at Obi-Wan's directive to not use the Force, broke out in tears, and the mother registered her disapprobation as well. ("I warned him," Lucas once noted of Guinness's conflicts about playing Obi-Wan. "I told him, 'Hey, you could be Leonard Nimoy.'") "I just hope that the lad," Guinness concludes, "now in his thirties, is not living in a fantasy world of secondhand, childish banalities." (Were Sir Alec alive, he might find Jonathan Lethem's essay in this book instructive.)

Well, one can live in a fantasy world of secondhand, childish banalities and still have time for other pursuits. One of the most eye-opening *Star Wars* references I've encountered while working on this book occurs in the picture *Sky's Day Off*. If you've never heard of it, pat yourself on the back and call yourself a good boy, or girl; it's a porno. It's of the sort-of-free-form, quasi-documentary "gonzo" school of adult entertainment, and it for the most part depicts its title performer, Sky (a rather alarmingly youthful and extremely boisterous woman who could be described as "the Britney Spears of porn," if that weren't midway between an oxymoron and a redundancy), running around at some skateboarding convention and trying to convince any number of young men to let her perform all manner of digital and oral manipulations on their person. (Some of them turn her down!) It begins with a skit in which Sky is about to perform a sex scene for the camera. She and her partner are a trifle conflicted as to positioning. She shoves him off of her and extends her arm. Suddenly a dildo flies through the air and into her hand. Her spurned male partner grabs another such device. Beams emanate from each one. The estranged couple settle

their differences with a lightsaber battle. Finally triumphant, she exclaims, "Who's on top now, bitch?" The back cover of the DVD of this title in fact depicts Sky in an Obi-Wan cape, holding the lightsaber. Thank God Guinness didn't live to see *that*. (Then again, it might have pepped him up a bit.) If Lucasfilm is interested in pursuing a lawsuit I'd be delighted to take a finder's fee, thanks. The company is quite tolerant of parodies and unauthorized tributes but don't take too kindly to filthy ones; they recently sued (unsuccessfully) the producers of a hardcore animated cartoon called *Star Ballz* (which I haven't looked at—do I have to?—but am assured is remarkably witless).

The various uses that the tools of *Star Wars* can be put to have a lot to do with the generation with which the film made, perhaps, its most meaningful contact. Such *Star Wars* aficionados are used to taking the good with the bad, the stirring with the stupid, because they're fully accustomed to what we have come to call the postmodern ironic point of view; hence, rather than being appalled by the music and the creatures in the Mos Eisley cantina scene, the way a good, serious sci-fi proponent such as Ballard was (he likened the bar's denizens to Muppets), they could practically embrace its cheesiness. (And it's easy to forget, when ruminating on the cheesier aspects of this sequence, that it in fact also contains some, you know, ass-kicking Jedi action, what with Obi-Wan's cutting off some reprobate's hand. Not to mention the whole introduction of Han/dispatch of Greedo business.) Their sensibilities, though, did not preclude them from being genuinely moved by the scene where Luke comes back to the farm, such as it is, to discover it in ruins, with his only family dead—a scene that echoes, as all good film geeks know, the post-Indian massacre homecoming scene in John Ford's 1956 Western *The Searchers*.

In his article "An Empire of Their Own" (*Premiere* magazine, October 2001), about the mind-boggling number of *Star Wars* fan films floating around the Internet, Harry Allen (who has an essay in this volume on the intriguing links between *Star Wars* and hip-hop) quotes Chris Moeller, the director of one such film, *Trip-*

ping the Rift: "Watching the [*Star Wars* movies], you get this feeling that you're seeing one part of this huge story that started a long time ago and continued long after the [movies] ended, and with enough unanswered questions that you want to see more." Add to that the rather elemental nature of the moral schema of the films (which Tom Carson addresses, among other things, in his provocative essay), and it becomes clear that a lot of the appeal of the *Star Wars* galaxy has to do with what it lacks as much as what it contains.

"What is it that makes people crave the *Star Wars* brand in so many flavors?" John Seabrook asks in *NoBrow*. "Somewhere between the idea and the stuff, it seemed to me . . . an alchemic transformation was taking place: dreams were being spun into desire, and desire into product." A similar observation was made, somewhat more amusingly, in one of the very few on-target moments in Mel Brooks's mostly tedious *Star Wars* parody, *Spaceballs*, in a scene where Rick Moranis, as a distinctly nebbishy would-be Vader, uses the action figures for the film's characters to enact his triumphant pursuit of the Princess.

For many of the writers collected here, their encounters with *Star Wars* were somehow life-changing; the movie functioned not only as a prism—looking at their own lives refracted through it, they conceived new ways of acting, of being—but also a *tabula rasa*, something they could inscribe their own experiences on. (This blankness influences critical thinking on the film, too; what some see as innocence in the films, others perceive as ingenuousness—not quite the same thing.) I came to *Star Wars* as a precocious would-be snob, living in close proximity to one of the greatest cultural centers in the world, during a time when my existence didn't seem particularly trying or troubled. Elwood Reid, on the other hand, encountered the movie in a much more challenging environment and wildly different circumstances. I don't believe he's exaggerating too much when he states in his essay that *Star Wars* was "the largest and most formidable cultural event to hit Ohio."

And, as Weird Al Yankovic so memorably put it, “The Saga Continues.” (Surely you didn’t miss his recasting of *The Phantom Menace*’s plot to the tune of “American Pie” back in 1999? For some it almost made the movie itself worthwhile.) Almost right before this book went to press, I got to see what they call an “all media” screening of *Episode II: Attack of the Clones*. “All media” screenings (well, it wasn’t quite “all media”—from the looks of the crowd, there were some very bonafide fans in attendance as well, probably lucky radio contest winners) are rather notorious for the jadedness of their audiences; and sure enough, this crowd tittered furiously at the love scenes between Anakin and Amidala. Of course they might not have had said scenes not been so appallingly written, awkwardly staged, and indifferently (at best) acted. Still . . . that same crowd went predictably nuts when Yoda wielded his light saber.

It’s a strange beast, *Clones*. What gives it its juice, for me, is its perversity. The convolutions Lucas has to put his creations through to set up *Episode III* (for instance, Jar Jar Binks winds up an inadvertent quisling, and the Jedi basically become the galaxy’s biggest stooges) are likely to inspire as much fervent analysis and heated debate among fans as the Dead Sea Scrolls did among theologians (*Star Wars*: Bigger than Jesus.) That this movie’s biggest box office competition is *Spiderman*, rather than something “adult” such as *New York, New York*, is likely to fill Thomson and Biskind with much “you see?”-style rue, and I’d be lying if I didn’t say I don’t feel any such thing myself. (And I kind of liked *Spiderman*.)

Two of this book’s contributors—Toms Bissell and Carson—rank *Clones* qualitatively second in the so-far five-film saga. (Their ways of putting it differ, though; one calls it “the second best *Star Wars* film behind *Empire*,” and the other calls it “the least bad *Star Wars* movie since *Empire*.” Finish the book and take a guess as to who said what.) And I agree, while falling somewhere between their two poles of enthusiasm. (We should also note here that Bissell’s prediction concerning Boba Fett’s origin—it’s coming up soon—was in fact dead on.) I love the fact that Christopher Lee’s in it—a nice dovetail to *Episode I: A New Hope*, which featured

Lee's great friend and fellow Hammer Films icon, the late Peter Cushing. (You can see the *Creature Features* fan in me rearing his twelve-year-old head, can't you?) I love the fact that it quotes not just *The Searchers* (again), but *Lawrence of Arabia*, Cocteau's *La Belle et La Bete*, and Cecil B. DeMille's *The Sign of the Cross*. The CGI worlds contained in the film are, for the most part, mind-boggling—as are some of Natalie Portlan's generally outre costumes, but never mind. Is the Force still with Lucas? Well, as stilted and teeth-grindingly lame as parts of *Clones* are, let's all ask ourselves, aren't we in the least bit curious to see how these meshugina Clone Wars turn out?

And there's your answer.

13, 1977, 21

JONATHAN LETHEM

1. In the summer of 1977 I saw *Star Wars*—the original, which is all I want to discuss here—twenty-one times. Better to blurt this at the start so I'm less tempted to retreat from what still seems to me a sort of raw, howling confession, one I've long hidden in shame. Again, to pin myself like a Nabokovian butterfly (no high-lit reference is going to bail me out here, I know) to my page in geek history: I watched *Star Wars* twenty-one times in the space of four months. I was that kid alone in the ticket line, slipping past ushers who'd begun to recognize me, muttering in impatience at a urinal before finding my favorite seat. That was me, occult as a porn customer, yes, though I've sometimes denied it. Now, a quarter century later, I'm ready for my close-up. Sort of.

2. That year, I was thirteen and likely as ideal an audience member as any mogul could have drooled for. Say every kid in the U.S. with even the passingest fondness for comic books or adventure fiction, *any kid with a television, even*, had bought a ticket for the same film in a single summer: blah, blah, right, that's what happened. So figure that for every hundred kids who traveled an ordinary path—*cool movie, wouldn't mind seeing it again with my*

friends—there might be one who'd make himself ill returning to the cookie jar five or six times—*it's really still good the fourth time, I swear!*—before copping to a tummy ache. Next, figure that for each *five* hundred, one or two would slip into some brain-warped identificatory obsession—I *am* Star Wars, Star Wars *am* me, *goo goo ga joob*—and return to the primal site often enough to push into the realm of trance and memorization. That's me, with my gaudy *twenty-one*, like DiMaggio's *fifty-six*. But what actually occurred within the secret brackets of that experience? What emotions lurk inside that ludicrous temple of hours? *What the fuck was I thinking?*

3. Every one of those twenty-one viewings took place at the Loew's Astor Plaza on Forty-fourth Street, just off Times Square. I'd never seen a movie there before (and unless you count *The Empire Strikes Back*, I didn't again until three years ago—*The Matrix*). And I've still never seen *Star Wars* anywhere else. The Astor Plaza was a low, deep-stretched hall with a massive screen and state-of-the-art sound, and newly enough renovated to be free of too much soda-rotted carpet, a plague among New York theaters in those days. Though architecturally undistinguished, it was a superior place to see anything, I suppose. But for me it was a shrine meant for just one purpose—I took it as weirdly significant that “Astor” could be rearranged into “astro”—and in a very *New Yorker*-coverish way I believed it to be the only real and right place to see *Star Wars*, the very ground zero of the phenomenon. I felt a dim but not at all urgent pity for any benighted fools stuck watching it elsewhere. I think I associated the Astor Plaza with the Death Star, in a way. Getting in always felt like an accomplishment, both elevating and slightly dangerous.

4. Along those lines, I should say it was vaguely unnerving to be a white kid in spectacles routinely visiting Times Square by subway in the middle of the '70s. Nobody ever said anything clearly about what was wrong or fascinating about that part of the city we lived in—the information was absorbed in hints and mutterings from a polyphony of sources. In fact, though I was conscious of a certain seamy energy in those acres of sex shows and drug dealers and their

sidewalk-lurking customers, I was never once hassled (and this was a time when my home neighborhood, in Brooklyn, was a mine-field). But the zone's reputation ensured I'd always plan my visits to fall wholly within summer's long daylight hours.

5. Problem: it doesn't seem at all likely that I went to the movie alone the first time, but I can't remember who I was with. I've polled a few of my likeliest friends from that period, but they're unable to help. In truth I can't recall a "first time" in any real sense, though I do retain a flash memory of the moment the prologue first began to crawl in titled perspective up the screen, an Alice in Wonderland doorway to dream. I'd been so primed, so attuned and ready to love it (I remember mocking my friend Evan for his thinking that the title meant it was going to be some kind of all-star cavalcade of a comedy, like *It's a Mad Mad Mad Mad World*, or *Smokey and the Bandit*) that my first time was gulped impatiently, then covered quickly in the memory of return visits. From the first I was "seeing it again." I think this memory glitch is significant. I associate it with my practice of bluffing familiarity with various drug experiences, later (not much later). My refusal to recall or admit to a first time was an assertion of maturity: I was *always already* a *Star Wars* fanatic.

6. I didn't buy twenty-one tickets. My count was amassed seeing the movie twice in a day over and over again. And one famous day (famous to myself) I sat through it three times. That practice of seeing a film twice through originated earlier. Somebody—my mother?—had floated the idea that it wasn't important to be on time for a movie, or even to check the screening times before going. Instead, moviegoing in Brooklyn Heights or on Fulton Street with my brother or with friends, we'd pop in at any point in the story, watch to the end, then sit through the break and watch the beginning. Which led naturally, if the film was any good, to staying past the original point of entry to see the end twice. Which itself led to routinely twice-watching a movie we liked, even if we hadn't been late. This was encouraged, partly according to a general "steal this book"—ish anticapitalist imperative for taking freebies in my

parents' circle in the '70s. Of course somebody—my mother?—had also figured out a convenient way to get the kids out of the house for long stretches.

7. I hate arriving late for movies now and would never watch one in this broken fashion. It seems to me, though, that I probably learned something about the construction of narratives from the practice. The lifelong moviegoing habit, which does originate for me with *Star Wars*, is that of sitting in movie theaters alone. I probably only had company in the Loew's Astor Plaza four or five times. The rest of my visits were solitary, which is certainly central to any guesses I'd make about the emotional meanings of the ritual viewings.

8. I still go to the movies alone, all the time. In the absencing of self that results—so different from the quality of solitude at my writing desk—this seems to me as near as I come in my life to any reverent or worshipful or meditational practice. That's not to say it isn't also indulgent, with a frisson of guilt, a stolen privilege every time. I'm acutely conscious of this joyous guilt in the fact that when as a solitary moviegoer I take a break to go to the bathroom *I can return to another part of the theater and watch from a different seat*. I first discovered this thrill during my *Star Wars* summer, and it's one that never diminishes. The rupture of the spectator's contract with perspective feels as transgressive as wife-swapping.

9. The function or dysfunction of my *Star Wars* obsession was paradoxical. I was using the movie as a place to hide, sure. That's obvious. At the same time, this activity of hiding inside the Loew's Astor Plaza, and inside my private, *deeper-than-yours, deeper-than-anyone's* communion with the film itself, was something I boasted widely about. By building my lamebrain world record for screenings (fat chance, I learned later) I was teaching myself to package my own craving for solitude, and my own obsessive tendencies, as something to be admired. *You can't join me inside this box where I hide*, I was saying, *but you sure can praise the box. You're permitted to marvel at me for going inside*.

10. What I was hiding from is easy, though. My parents had separated a couple of years earlier. Then my mother had begun having

seizures, been diagnosed with a brain tumor, and had the first of two surgeries. The summer of *Star Wars* she was five or six months from the second, unsuccessful surgery, and a year from dying.

11. I took my brother, and he stayed through it twice. We may have done that together more than once—neither of us clearly remembers. I took a girl, on a quasi date: Alissa Simon, the sister of my best friend, Joel. I took my mother. I tried to take my grandmother.

12. That same summer I once followed Alissa Simon to a ballet class at Carnegie Hall and hung around the studio, expressing a polite curiosity which was cover for another, less polite curiosity. The instructor was misled or chose to misunderstand—a thirteen-year-old boy willing to set foot inside a ballet studio was a commodity, a raw material. I was offered free classes, and the teacher called my house and strong-armed my parents. I remember vividly my mother's pleasure in refusing on my behalf—I was too much of a coward—and how strongly she fastened on the fact that my visit had had nothing to do with any interest in ballet. For years this seemed to me an inexplicable cruelty in my mother towards the ballet teacher. Later I understood that in those first years of adolescence I was giving off a lot of signals to my parents that I might be gay. I was a delicate, obedient, and bookish kid, a constant teacher's pet. Earlier that year my father had questioned me regarding a series of distended cartoon noses I'd drawn in ballpoint on my loose-leaf binder—they had come out looking a lot like penises. And my proclaimed favorite *Star Wars* character was the tweaking English robot, C-3PO.

13. I did and do find C-3PO sexy. It's as if a strand of DNA from Fritz Lang's fetishized girl robot in *Metropolis* has carried forward to the bland world of *Star Wars*. Also, whereas Carrie Fisher's robes went to her ankles, C-3PO is obviously naked, and ashamed of it.

14. Alissa Simon thought the movie was okay (my overstated claims generally cued a compensating shrug in others) and that was our last date, if it was a date. We're friends now.

15. I don't know how much of an effort it was for my mother to travel by subway to a movie theater in Manhattan by the summer

of '77, but I do know it was unusual, and that she was certainly doing it to oblige me. It might have been one of our last ventures out together, before it was impossible for her. I remember fussing over rituals inside the theater, showing her my favorite seat, and straining not to watch her watch it throughout, not to hang on her every reaction. Afterwards she, too, found the movie just okay. It wasn't her kind of thing, but she could understand why I liked it so much. Those were pretty close to her exact words. Maybe with her characteristic Queens hard-boiled tone: *I see why you like it, kiddo*. Then, in a turn I find difficult to relate, she left me there to watch it a second time, and took the subway home alone. What a heart-breaking rehearsal! I was saying, in effect: *come and see my future, postmom self. Enact with me your parting from it*. Here's the world of cinema and stories and obsessive identification I'm using to survive your going—now go. How generous of her to play in this masquerade, if she knew.

16. I spent a certain amount of time that year trying hopelessly to distract my grandmother from the coming loss of her only child—it would mostly wreck her—by pushing my new enthusiasms at her. For instance she and I had a recurrent argument about rock and roll, one which it now strikes me was probably a faint echo, for her, of struggles over my mother's dropping out of Queens College in favor of a Greenwich Village beatnik-folk lifestyle. I worked to find a hit record she couldn't quibble with, and thought I'd found one in Wings' "Mull of Kintyre," which is really just a strummy Irish folk song. I played it for her at top volume and she grimaced, her displeasure not at the music but at the apparent trump card I'd played. Then, on the fade, Paul McCartney gave out a kind of *whoop-whoop* holler and my grandmother seized on this, with relish: "You hear that? He had to go and scream. It wasn't good enough just to sing, he had to scream like an animal!" Her will was too much for me. So it was that when she resisted being dragged to *Star Wars* I probably didn't mind, being uninterested in having her trample on my secret sand castle. She and I were ultimately in a kind of argument about whether or not our

family was a site of tragedy, and I probably sensed I was on the losing end of that one.

17. My father lived in a commune for part of that summer, though my mother's illness sometimes drew him back into the house. There was a man in the commune—call him George Lucas—whose married life, which included two young children, was coming apart. George Lucas was the person I knew who'd seen *Star Wars* the most times, apart from me, and we had a ritualized bond over it. He'd ask me how many times I'd seen the film and I'd report, like an emissary with good news from the front. George Lucas had a copy of the soundtrack and we'd sit in the commune's living room and play it on the stereo, which I seem to remember being somewhat unpopular with the commune's larger membership. George Lucas, who played piano and had some classical training, would always proclaim that the score was *really pretty good symphonic composition*—he'd also play me Gustav Holst's *The Planets* as a kind of primer, and to show me how the Death Star theme came from Holst's "Jupiter"—and I would dutifully parrot this for my friends, with great severity: John Williams's score was *really pretty good symphonic composition*.

18. The movie itself, right: of course, I must have enjoyed it immensely the first few times. That's what I least recall. Instead I recall now how, as I memorized scenes, I fought my impatience and yet fought not to know I was fighting impatience—all that mattered were the winnowed satisfactions of crucial moments occurring once again, like stations of the cross: "Help me Obi-Wan Kenobi, you're my only hope," "These aren't the droids you're looking for," "If you strike me down, I'll become more powerful than you can possibly imagine," and the dunk shot of Luke's missiles entering the Death Star's duct. I hated, absolutely, the sewage scene. I hated not knowing who Biggs was. I hated Han Solo and Princess Leia's flirtation, after a while, feeling I was being manipulated, that it was too mannered and rote: of course they're grumbling now, that's how it *always* goes. I hated the triumphalist ceremony at the end, though the spiffing-up of the robots was ■


consolation, a necessary relief. I think I came to hate a lot of the film, but I couldn't permit myself to know it. I even came, within a year or so, to hate the fact that I'd seen the movie twenty-one times.

19. Why that number? Probably I thought it was safely ridiculous and extreme to get my record into the twenties, yet stopping at only twenty seemed too mechanically round. Adding one more felt plausibly arbitrary, more *realistic*. That was likely all I could stand. Perhaps at twenty-one I'd also attained the symbolic number of adulthood, of maturity. By bringing together *thirteen* and *twenty-one* I'd made *Star Wars* my bar mitzvah, a ritual I didn't have and probably could have used that year. Now I was a man.

20. By the time I was fifteen not only had I long since quit boasting about my love of *Star Wars*, but it had become privately crucial to have another favorite movie inscribed in its place. I decided Kubrick's *2001: A Space Odyssey* was a suitably noble and alienated choice, but that in order to make it official I'd have to see it more times than *Star Wars*. An exhausting proposition, but I went right at it. One day at the Thalia on West Ninety-fifth Street I sat alone through *2001* three times in a row in a nearly empty theater, a commitment of some nine hours. That day I brought along a tape recorder in order to whisper notes on this immersion experience to my friend Eliot—I also taped *Also sprach Zarathustra* all six times. If *Star Wars* was my bar mitzvah then *2001* was getting laid, an experience requiring a more persuasive maturity, and one which I more honestly enjoyed, especially fifteen or twenty showings in. Oddly enough, though, I never did completely overwrite *Star Wars* with *2001*. Instead I stuck at precisely twenty-one viewings of the second movie as well, leaving the two in a dead heat. Even that number was only attained years later, at the University theater in Berkeley, California, two days after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. There was a mild aftershock which rumbled the old theater during the Star Gate sequence, a nice touch.

21. I'll never see another film so many times, though I still count. I've seen *The Searchers* twelve times—a cheat, since it was

partly research. Otherwise, I usually peak out at six or seven viewings, as with *Bringing Up Baby* and *3 Women* and *Love Streams* and *Vertigo*, all films I believe I love more than either *Star Wars* or *2001*. But that kid who still can't decide which of the two futuristic epics to let win the struggle for his mortal soul, the kid who left the question hanging, the kid who partly invented himself in the vacuum collision of *Star Wars* and real loss—that kid is me.



PALE STARSHIP, PALE RIDER: The Ambiguous Appeal of Boba Fett

TOM BISSELL

It is said he fears nothing, and affords his bounties no pity. His weapon of choice is a sawed-off BlasTech EE-3 rifle. His armor—dented, sandblasted, scarred by unimaginable travails—is Mandalorian, the armor of a race that was defeated by the Jedi during the Great Sith War four thousand years ago, though his connection to that mighty people remains unclear. On the upper right side of his olive breastplate, one finds a cryptic, xiphoid insignia stamp. Perhaps this indicates his ultimate group affiliation, though what that might be is anyone's guess. But it is curious. Like so much about him, it begs questions.

His helmet looks like a fifteenth-century Prussian knight's headgear morphed with that of a twenty-third-century linebacker. No glimpse is allowed of his mouth or eyes, though both are suggested by the helmet's tinted T-visor, which endows him with much of his visual dazzle, as does the helmet's targeting range finder, which lowers and retracts, and gives him the faintly edifying air of a large science project. His cape is short, torn, and perhaps singed from its close proximity to the jetpack strapped to his back. His jetpack is also a functional missile launcher, though we do not

question how this could be, and from head-on, a single slender war-head can be seen jutting from behind his helmet, looking like an unusually thick antenna.

His utility pouch holds a sonic knife and a sonic beam weapon. His red wrist gauntlets contain powerful blasters and a utility cable. His shoulderpads, both yellow, are blast plates. The yellow pads on his knees possess small rocket-dart launchers. Around his waist is a red honor sash, though from whom or where this honor derives is, again, unknown. The parts of his body not armored are covered by a reinforced double-layer gray flight suit. His boots are spike-tipped and strangely small. From his right shoulder, most terrifyingly, hang several braided Wookiee scalps.

His services are exorbitantly priced, though no one complains of this when they hire him. Nor should they. He is, the galaxy agrees, quite simply best at what he does. Some say he is a failed Imperial Stormtrooper who murdered his commanding officer and defected to a cause no larger than that of his personal enrichment. Others maintain his real name is Jaster Mereel, a Journeyman Protector from Concord Dawn who, after being convicted of treason and driven from his home galaxy, became the notorious bounty hunter known as Boba Fett.

Of course, none of the above is true. It is not even true in the sense that the *Star Wars* films are true. The technical information concerning Boba Fett's costume and weaponry comes from, of all people, a University of Michigan Ph.D. in archaeology named David West Reynolds, who provided his talents for a strange little endeavor entitled *Star Wars: The Visual Dictionary*, which really needs to be seen to be believed. Everything else is what has been grafted onto Boba Fett by fans and licensed Lucasfilm scribes. This is a lot of mythology to have accrued around a character who, in the films that unleashed him, speaks a grand total of four lines and appears in a grand total of eleven scenes—even if those films are the most popular in history. A quarter of a century after his debut,

no one seems to know why Boba Fett has become so popular. Nor does anyone seem to care. He looks “cool,” one often hears, and indeed he does. Nevertheless, it brings some small amount of distress, though not much surprise, to think that a stylish visage might be all that is required to secure the imperishable cultural status of American iconhood.

Although everyone wonders where Boba Fett comes from, *Star Wars* creator George Lucas has for years forbidden any of his authorized jobbers to explore that question. Presumably, Lucas would like to answer it himself. Boba Fett is a bounty hunter and a murderer, however, and it is not too difficult to imagine what forces may have begotten him. Most likely, his origin will be like that of a thousand cultural boogiemens: an early trauma, a lost father, an incinerated village, the tortured embers of childhood leading to adulthood’s later, more vengeful fires. Or maybe he really is for hire and nothing more, which is of course far more unsettling. When, in *Macbeth*, murderers break into Macduff’s home to find Lady Macduff and her young son, they demand to know of her husband’s location. “I hope,” she answers, “in no place so unsanctified / Where such as thou mayst find him.” Perhaps this is the caul from which all such characters are pulled, and perhaps a loss of simple sanctity is the best explanation for those without mercy.

None of which even begins to address the whole “cool” thing.

Boba Fett action figures, statuettes, and trading cards can summon from collectors hundreds of dollars. A recent web site poll found him the second most popular character (behind Han Solo) in the *Star Wars* universe. Type “Boba Fett” into Google’s search engine and smooch good-bye to the next few days, exploring the twenty thousand web sites devoted to him. (Warning: Boba Fett porn exists.) To page through the Lucasfilm publishing catalog is to see Fett’s unbelievable popularity transubstantiate. No less than *eighteen* books feature Boba Fett as a centerpiece character, even German editions (“*Boba Fett: Die Stunde der Kopfgeldjäger*”). If that doesn’t seem like a respectable plenitude, keep in mind that Jane Austen wrote six novels, James Joyce only three. Of course,

anyone familiar with the extended world of *Star Wars* knows that one of its cardinal delights is how its minor characters are allowed to enjoy celluloid jailbreaks and emerge as interesting figures in their own right. So while Han Solo remains the most popular major *Star Wars* character to receive extrafilmic consecration (though Liam Neeson's terse, martyred Qui-Gon Jinn seems a definite momentum-gainer), characters like Darth Maul, Mace Windu, and Kyle Katarn (from the "Dark Forces" video games) compete with Boba Fett, mostly ineffectively, for minor character supremacy. (Even Anakin Skywalker's freaking pit droid from *The Phantom Menace* gets its own little book.) What Fett and Maul and Katarn and to a lesser extent Windu (we know he's a good guy, and a Jedi, but he's also Samuel L. Jackson) all have in common is their appeal to fifteen-year-old boys' images of themselves: essentially bad-ass but, you know, honorable about it.

But the richness of Boba Fett compared to similar-seeming characters can be quickly adduced by reading one of the novels devoted to them. I read numerous Boba Fett comics and novels in preparation for this essay, and while I cannot say that in every instance I enjoyed the stories, I was always at least *interested* by them. This is because Boba Fett—like Batman, or King David, or Norman Mailer's Rojack, or Rabbit Angstrom, despite the flaws of each (in order: distant, selfish, buggerly-obsessed, obtuse)—is fundamentally interesting. One simply likes reading about Boba Fett.

Darth Maul, who perhaps is my favorite current *Star Wars* character, stars in the 2001 novel *Shadow Hunter*, which I picked up overtly to write this essay and covertly because I had enjoyed Maul so much in *The Phantom Menace*, initially regarding him as a figure of Fettlike intrigue. Both are mysterious, tough, and visually compelling. But *Shadow Hunter* is a miserable reading experience. It makes *The Bridges of Madison County* look like *Blood Meridian*. I am not even able to imagine a twelve-year-old boy with a drawerful of Darth Maul T-shirts finding much enjoyment here. (It is fascinating, as a side note, to read these books from a purely literary standpoint and see how language becomes another special effect: "Collaborating with Darth Sidious was about as safe as being

trapped in a cave on Tatooine with a hungry krayt dragon." There exists here a conundrum of Lacanian proportions: How can a simile be a simile if the reader has absolutely no goddamn idea what the simile is referring to? And these novels have *pages* of this baloney.) I mean no disrespect to *Shadow Hunter's* author, one Michael Reaves, and I believe it is ultimately the fault of Maul and not Reaves that *Shadow Hunter* is such a stinking pile. Because here it is: *Darth Maul is irretrievably evil and therefore uninteresting from a dramatic point of view*. The fizzless language the novel uses in describing Maul makes this plain: "Darth Maul exhaled, relaxed his stance, and nodded. His heart rate had accelerated perhaps five beats above normal at most. There was the faintest sheen of perspiration on his forehead. . . . Maul frowned slightly. Not his personal best, by any means. It was one thing to face and defeat droids. Jedi were a different matter." (The Darth Maul Workout cannot be far behind.) What makes Maul so compelling on film—coolness, impenetrability, calm—makes him ludicrous on the page. There is no struggle in an evil character. One can be tormented and do evil things—Raskolnikov is the supreme example forever—and retain dramatic interest, but one's evil nature cannot be a foregone conclusion. Fett may lack struggle at a certain fundamental level of the soul, but he does not seem irretrievably evil. After all, our hero Han Solo worked for the repulsive asshole Jabba the Hutt and was once, long ago, a cadet in the Imperial Academy—and just what exactly were those "spices" he is smuggling around the galaxy in *A New Hope*? Han Solo, under different circumstances, on a different day, could be Boba Fett, and Fett, given the right tweaks of conscience, could be Solo. This is what drapes both characters with their many fascinations. Darth Maul—and even, I daresay, Darth Vader, despite his turn at the end of *Jedi*, which is infuriating in that it is never even suggested before that film—simply cannot command the deep, artesian interest of ■ Boba Fett.

It is apt that Boba Fett, in all his dark, beclouded glory, debuts in *The Empire Strikes Back*, the only *Star Wars* film that might reasonably be called dark and beclouded. *Empire* begins on frozen barrens and ends on a faraway view of a desolately beautiful solar

system. Between these bookends, the forces of good are routed and evil enjoys unquestioned triumph. (Not that this is good or praiseworthy in itself, as some who love *Empire* seem to think. It is merely unusual, especially for a film of *Empire's* box office ambition.) The film's most joyous moment—R2-D2's repair of the *Millennium Falcon's* hyperdrive—is not one of victory but rather terrified escape. And *Empire* is filled with moody pronouncements: General Rieekan's "A death mark's not an easy thing to live with"; Han Solo's nihilistic cry, "Then I'll see you in hell!" A recent re-viewing of *Empire* resuscitated moments of even heavier darkness: Solo gutting a tauntaun with Luke's lightsaber, Vader's played-for-laughs garrotings of Admiral Ozzel and Captain Needa, R2's traumatic whistling as he is devoured by a swamp monster, the *unbelievably* visceral Han Solo torture scene, and the still-shocking lopping off of Luke Skywalker's hand in his duel with Vader. Conversely, the film in which Boba Fett is dispensed with without ceremony or honor and indeed for nothing more than a burp joke, *Return of the Jedi*, features a neutered Han Solo, ■ mincing and unbearable C-3PO, the shameless scenery-devouring of Ian McDiarmid's Emperor, the bathetic neo-Elizabethan dialogue between Luke and Leia on Endor, and the exciting, innovative inclusion of a Death Star.

Originally, Boba Fett was conceived by *Star Wars* art director Joe Johnston and concept artist Ralph McQuarrie as the prototype of a counterinsurgency force called Super Troopers, though the idea was soon spurned in favor of a single character. Some of Boba Fett's other elements were salvaged from early, rejected Darth Vader concepts. "I painted Boba's outfit and tried to make it look like it was made of different pieces of armor," Johnston has said. "It was a symmetrical design, but I painted it in such ■ way that it looked like he had scavenged parts and done some personalizing of his costume." This is fitting. Boba Fett is a mercenary, and mercenaries are typically equipped with the weaponry of spendthrift nations unwilling to splash blood upon their own hands. Mercenaries also

often "personalize" their uniforms. In, say, Latin America, they have been known to do so with human ears. Such supranational audacity is precisely what makes mercenaries like Boba Fett so terrifying and so cool. It is also what, in many cases, makes mercenaries appealing to those without any identifiable sense of nationalism, which includes a huge number of Americans, especially young people and especially those on the Left. One can wrap economic determinism, political revolution, and social justice around one armed, irresistible fulcrum.

But might not Boba Fett actually be a completely brutal prick? *Star Wars: The Visual Dictionary* holds that "Fett's services are famously expensive, but his honor cannot be bought. He only accepts missions which meet his harsh sense of justice." As though "a harsh sense of justice" somehow exculpates the disintegration of people whose crimes are no worse than crossing the Empire or embezzling some Imperial credits from an evil Hutt. It may seem silly to question why there exists such widespread devotion to a character of such moral obscurity—this is, after all, the nation of Billy the Kid, Jesse James, Bonnie and Clyde, and Bernard Goetz—but I would hold, sorry, it's just not.

Boba Fett is cool because he was designed to be cool. He was designed to be cool because, like Milton's Satan and *Othello's* Iago, he is a character of wicked ambiguity, and those who put Boba Fett together created that ambiguity with care and expertise. Darth Vader is intimidating and at times emotionally overpowering, but that is not the same thing as cool. Consequently, he is not beloved by fans in the same way. The films' ostensible hero, Luke Skywalker, appealing in *A New Hope* and an insufferable pretentious druid in *Jedi*, is not cool either. Nor is he supposed to be.

Here, for the record, are Boba Fett's lines:

- 1) "As you wish."
- 2) "He's no good to me dead."

- 3) "What if he doesn't survive? He's worth a lot to me."
- 4) "Put Captain Solo in the cargo hold."

And here, for the record, are Boba Fett's scenes:

1) The Bounty Hunter Scene, *The Empire Strikes Back*. This is Boba Fett's first and most visually memorable appearance in the films. Devoutly loved by *Star Wars* fans, this amazingly vivid sequence, which lasts less than forty seconds, seeks less to introduce the bounty hunters than to develop the character of Admiral Piett—Imperial first officer, Vader lapdog, and efficient failure—who is himself one of the films' most likable and sympathetic characters. Piett, standing subjacent to the bounty hunters on the deck of the Super-class Star Destroyer *Executor*, is made uncomfortable by this motley assortment of interstellar vigilantism and shares that discomfort with one of his subalterns. "Scum," is actually what Piett calls the bounty hunters. "Yes, sir," the junior officer says, obviously not listening. Piett turns to find himself eye-to-toe with a saurian bounty hunter, who looks down at Piett and snarls. Piett quickly but politely excuses himself. (It is this kind of gentle character touch that makes *Empire* the superior film it is.) We close, then, on the bounty hunters, as Vader debriefs them about capturing Han Solo and the *Millennium Falcon*. Although the *Star Wars* universe putatively crawls with bounty hunters, only six are fully established in the films (not counting the ill-fatedly oblivious Greedo or Princess Leia's Boushh disguise). The six standard orthodox bounty hunters, then, are: Dengar, a squat, half-armored and half-mummy-wrapped killer whose computerized brain allows him perfect detachment; IG-88, a slender and metallic assassin droid, purportedly one of five identical robots that massacred their creators moments after activation and who, unfortunately, looks about as deadly as a pipe cleaner; Boba Fett; Bossk, the aforementioned saurian bounty hunter, a Trandoshan able to regenerate lost limbs and given to skinning his quarry alive; 4-LOM, an insectoid former protocol droid whose programming has degenerated into a

murderous fog; and 4-LOM's partner, Zuckuss, a short, enrobed, gas-masked "findsman" from the planet Gand. Save for Boba Fett, not one of these bounty hunters makes another appearance in the films, though all have turned up in extrafilmic incarnations (including an unexpectedly terrifying IG-88 in the Nintendo 64 game "Shadows of the Empire," in which one must hunt or be hunted by the whisper-thin assassin in a junkyard on the planet Kessel—a real Depends moment, believe me). It is Boba Fett, however, who stands out in the scene. So much of his effortless authority is established merely by his stance—he cradles rather than holds his blaster, his head slightly cocked (these innovations are directly attributable to Jeremy Bulloch, the actor who portrayed Fett)—and it is not surprising at all when Vader stops to address Fett directly, as though his fellow bounty hunters are not even deserving of the *assumption* that they will be able to collar Solo and the *Falcon*. Here, too, we get Fett's first line. Considering how emblematic the bounty hunter sequence has become, it is surprising to learn that almost all of the characters were thrown together only days before *Empire* director Irvin Kershner had to shoot the scene. Dengar's costume is a piecemeal agglomeration of Imperial Storm- and Snowtrooper armor, spray-painted brown. Bossk is wearing a slightly modified version of an X-wing pilot's uniform, dyed yellow. 4-LOM is a C-3PO body beneath a standard FX-shop bug-creature head. Zuckuss is like a thalidomide Tusken Raider. IG-88 is the most obvious casualty of last-secondness, and if one looks at this scene carefully one can see that IG-88's feet remain hidden. This is because the droid was impossible to balance without some sort of broad pedestal beneath him. (Anyone who has seen these movies as many times as I have—don't ask—knows of any number of such lapses, most of which reveal understandable budgetary limitations. For instance, a few moments after Greedo is shot in *A New Hope*, he walks past the camera in a crowd scene. In *Empire*, the junked IG-88 prop can be seen in the background while Chewbacca fights Cloud City's Ugnaughts for 3PO's blasted body parts. *The Star Wars Visual Dictionary* ingeniously explains the latter by

claiming that an IG-88 droid followed Boba Fett to Cloud City only to be ambushed and slain by Fett “in the scrap processing levels.”)

2) The Space Trash Scene, *The Empire Strikes Back*. Here Boba Fett picks up the trail of the *Millennium Falcon*, which has daringly evaded an entire fleet of Star Destroyers by attaching itself to one of them. The Star Destroyers dump their garbage (this is, according to Han Solo, standard Imperial procedure and an interesting nugget of long-ago, faraway anthropology), and the suddenly detached *Falcon* uses the jettisoned flotsam as camouflage. Unfortunately for its crew, so does Boba Fett, now piloting his starship *Slave 1* (which Industrial Light & Magic artists modeled on a street-lamp). In this scene we also hear the debut of Boba Fett’s theme music. It is not a theme in the sense that the “Imperial March” (probably John Williams’s most impressive composition for the films) is the theme of the Empire, or “Han Solo and the Princess” is the love theme of Han and Leia, though it is distinctive and belongs to Boba Fett alone. But it is not music, exactly. It is more of a gurgly, viola-and-bassoon thing aurally cross-pollinated with some obscure static sounds. (This scene was expanded upon in the Special Edition of *Empire*, giving *Slave 1* a bit more flying time.)

3) The Refreshments-with-Lando Scene, *The Empire Strikes Back*. This is, to my mind, the most spectacular scene in the *Star Wars* films. Here, Lando Calrissian escorts an unwitting Han, Leia, and Chewbacca to their doom within a Cloud City banquet hall. When the doors to the hall open, Han sees Vader sitting at the table’s head like some sort of demonic paterfamilias. Vader rises only to have Solo unholster his DL-44 pistol and open fire, the blasts of which Vader blocks *with his freaking palm*. He then uses the Force to suck the pistol from Solo’s hand to his own. (One should point out how *good* Harrison Ford is in the scene. The anger, terror, shock, and resignation in his eyes in this brief sequence equals anything he does in *Witness* or in the interrogation scene in *The Fugitive*.) Cut to Boba Fett, lightly bobbing down some nearby steps, his rifle pointed in casual menace. Wow. Really. (Though it

seems a direly missed opportunity that the actual lunch was apparently never scripted or filmed.)

4) The Torture Scene, *The Empire Strikes Back*. Here Han Solo is lowered onto an electrified thingamajig—it looks convincingly painful—while Vader looks monstrosly on. Then Vader is tracked outside the torture chamber and he converses with Fett and a pensive, worried Lando. Meanwhile, in the background, Solo can be heard to be really pretty effectively screaming over the negotiations concerning his and his crew's fate. At this point Boba Fett speaks his second line. In doing so he also stands up to Darth Vader, a moment much remarked upon in *Star Wars* fandom, since Vader neglects to confront him, the only non-Emperor instance of a quailing Vader in any of the films.

5) The Carbon Freeze Scene, *The Empire Strikes Back*. Line three of Boba Fett's can be heard here, and like "He's no good to me dead," "What if he doesn't survive? He's worth a lot to me" seems a pretty ballsy thing to say to Darth Vader. Boba Fett actually does very little in this scene—another classic, another triumph for Harrison Ford—other than stand around and look steam-shrouded and inscrutably evil.

6) The Ambush Scene, *The Empire Strikes Back*. Here Luke Skywalker stumbles across Boba Fett and some Cloud City guards escorting Solo's carbonite-encased body through the cool, white hallways of Bespin. Luke hangs back, letting the small caravan pass, though it is unclear whether he is aware that the body within the carbonite is Solo's (and if Luke does know this, his subsequent doing nothing about it makes him a dick of hitherto unknown, albeit not entirely unimaginable, proportions). Once Fett and his retinue are safely avoided, Luke jogs up for a closer look, a beeping R2 rolling up behind him. Luke wisely silences R2, then steps around the corner—only to see that Boba Fett has backtracked and opened fire. Luke's eyes saucerize as he jumps back behind the corner, two of Fett's very loud, very explosive shots barely missing him. Left in Fett's assaultive wake are two big smoking holes and a light veil of smoke, which he then uses to cover his escape.

7) The "Cargo Hold" Scene, *The Empire Strikes Back*. This final, brief sequence shows Boba Fett standing on a landing platform, backlit by the molten dusk of a Cloud City sunset, as he oversees Solo's body as it is stevedored into the back of *Slave 1*. Cue line four.

Actor Jeremy Bulloch tells a funny story about this scene. Bulloch, who does not provide Fett's voice, was, like David Prowse, who played Darth Vader's body, required to say Fett's lines during filming in order to provide guidance during the postproduction redubbing process. Rather than the scripted line, Bulloch accidentally said, "Put Captain cargo in the Solo hold," and the rough cut was printed that way.

8) The "Lapti Nek"/"Jedi Rocks" Scene, *Return of the Jedi*. The most unspeakable sequence in all the films, almost too depressing to discuss at any length, finds Boba Fett at Jabba the Hutt's palace on Tatooine, listening to the Max Rebo Band and, in the expanded *Jedi* Special Edition footage, flirting with the humanoid tarts who make up Jabba's dancing troupe. In the original *Jedi*, the band's song was a *Flashdance*-grade number called "Lapti Nek." It was horrible. In the new *Jedi*, the song is called "Jedi Rocks." It is a million times worse. The computer-generated imagery is terrible, the characters ridiculous, the humor that particular brand of unfunny George Lucas humor for which *Jedi* owns the trademark.

9) The Boushh Scene, *Return of the Jedi*. Here, in another bottomlessly bad *Jedi* sequence, Princess Leia, disguised as the bounty hunter Boushh, muscles her way into Jabba's palace, Chewbacca in handcuffed tow, and threatens to blow herself and everyone else to smithereens if her demand of a fifty-thousand-credit bounty is not met. Boba Fett does two things in this scene, first raising his rifle when Boushh unveils her thermal detonator and second nodding at her respectfully when Jabba's offer of thirty thousand credits is accepted and the danger has passed. There is, needless to say, a lot wrong with this scene (including the linguistically unprecedented idea that in Boushhese "Yoto, yoto" can mean "Fifty thousand, no less"), but the most pressing issue is the strangeness of the plan the

Rebels have ginned up to free Han. First, 3PO and R2 arrive at Jabba's palace and surrender, as per Luke Skywalker's instruction. But Lando is already working there, somehow, a fact of which no one seems quite aware. Then Leia shows up, gets Chewie thrown in the pokey, and is then herself imprisoned when she blockheadedly frees Han while a dozen of the palace's freeloaders are snoozing nearby. (How *were* they going to spring Chewie?) Luke, at this point, decides to arrive, promptly gets *himself* arrested, is nearly eaten by the rancor, and then pretends that the whole cockamamie process is part of a preordained *plan*. One suspects that this plan was not given the closest eyeballing by its participants, none of whom seem to have the slightest fucking clue who is supposed to be doing what. Not that this has much to do with Boba Fett, admittedly.

10) The Skiff Fight Scene, *Return of the Jedi*. Here we find Fett jetpacking from Jabba's sail barge to one of the smaller skiffs to join battle with Luke Skywalker above the dunes of Tatooine and the sarlaac pit. It is the only instance of Fett using his jetpack in the films, and the special effect that depicts its use is bad, but forgivably so. Upon Fett's arrival at the melee, Luke chops his blaster in half. Fett, in another display of gadgetry, wraps up Luke with what looks to be grappling cable. Luke, however, does something with his wrist, which forces Boba Fett to fall, with a clatter, to the skiff's deck. (It is very tough to discern what exactly is happening in the more action-based portions of this scene, especially if you're watching an unletterboxed video of the movie.) Luke jumps to another skiff, and a groggy Fett, rising, trains his wrist blaster on Luke and prepares to fire. The blind, useless Han Solo is finally informed by Chewie that Boba Fett is in the immediate area, and Solo turns wildly, swinging a vibro-ax and hitting Fett's jetpack ignition switch. Fett is, for some reason, unable to control himself, and he flies screamingly past Luke's ongoing scuffle, bashes into the side of Jabba's sail barge—again with ■ nicely clattery sound effect—and rolls into the mouth of the waiting sarlaac. Not a good death. In fact, quite a stupid death, and were I one of those frothing

Boba Fett fans I would feel a little cheated by it myself. An interesting thing about this sequence is that Boba Fett seems more interested in fighting Luke than he does Han Solo, his supposed *bête noire*. Boba Fett actually fights Luke on *two* occasions in the films, whereas the number of blows he trades with Solo is exactly none. One would think that if the most pitiless bounty hunter in the galaxy had his archenemy blind, helpless, and three feet away from him, he might move in for the kill, but Boba Fett does no such thing.

11) The Jabba Scene, *A New Hope* Special Edition. In this bafflingly added exchange between Han Solo and Jabba the Hutt, Boba Fett makes a scene-concluding money-shot appearance: he walks across the screen, pauses, and meaningfully glances around. (We also get here a nice reprise of the weird and little-used Boba Fett theme music.) The audience with whom I saw the Special Edition burst into completely spontaneous and absolutely ecstatic joy when Fett unexpectedly stepped back into their imaginations. It was a strange response, I thought, and an amazing one in that I had little idea of how powerfully the Fett character still gripped the minds of many *Star Wars* fans. Furthermore, Fett is, significantly, the only *Star Wars* character to receive *three* CGI benefactions in the Special Editions, even when, as here, it is inappropriate and actually kind of illogical. What is Boba Fett doing hanging around with all these low-grade Jabba bootlicks, anyway? But Fett, it seems, is as popular with the films' creators as he is with the films' civilian fans. No one can resist him.

Searching the Web diligently enough leads to some strongholds of anti-Fett dissent. The most sustained attack on Fett's reputation can be found at www.piett.org. (This is a web site devoted to Admiral Piett, which should give a sense of the unlikely nooks and crannies the films' fans will crawl into for originality's sake.) In the site's "Fett File—Legend or Loser," purportedly written by Piett as an Imperial debriefing, the case against Boba Fett is assembled. "Fett," one file reads, "was given great praise for having captured

Solo and delivering him to the crimelord, Jabba the Hutt. In fact, it was Lord Vader who encased Solo in carbonite—all Fett did was deliver him, a task even a messenger droid could accomplish.” In another file, its compiler wonders, not unreasonably: “What kind of idiot leaves an activation switch carelessly exposed on the back of his jetpack anyway?” But even this dissent carries with it the pesty self-awareness that Fett’s popularity is, like glaciers or sunlight, all but impossible to thwart.

Boba Fett’s cultural durability is unusually resilient for a character whose nativity came not, in fact, in *The Empire Strikes Back*, but rather by way of the animated portion of the tragically bad 1978 *Star Wars* Christmas television special. Interestingly, Fett is presented in the eleven-minute cartoon as Darth Vader’s aide-de-camp rather than an independent bounty hunter. Fett, working as Vader’s spy, first saves Luke Skywalker from a monster and then attempts to trick him into spilling the beans about the location of the Rebels’ secret base. Meanwhile, Han and Chewie are attempting to steal some talisman or something that makes people fall asleep. Everyone meets up, Boba Fett is fingered as a spy, and that is pretty much that. Some points of interest: Fett’s voice in the cartoon is not at all similar to the one he will have two years later in *Empire*, and many aspects of his overall mien have yet to be perfected; also, he first appears riding a large apatosaurus and brandishing what looks to be a mammoth tuning fork; also, while the cartoon and its Christmas special integument have apparently been purged from the canonical *Star Wars* “Bible,” the enjoyably nerdy starwars.com notes in its Boba Fett file that “one report had [Boba Fett] allowing Rebel agents to capture a mystical talisman infected with an Imperial sleeping virus, though records of the event remain classified and cannot be confirmed,” which at the very least shows that the folks curating Lucas’s *musée imaginaire* have a pretty wicked sense of humor about themselves and what they do.

Boba Fett’s second appearance was, again, not in *The Empire Strikes Back* but as a Kenner action figure. In 1979, it was announced

that one could receive in the mail a new *Star Wars* figure, *one not available in stores*, by sending in several Kenner proof-of-purchase labels from other *Star Wars* merchandise. (Fett had a roughly concomitant appearance in the *Star Wars* daily comic strip—which, sadly, no one seems to remember—in a story line called “The Frozen World of Ota.”) Since my mother had purchased for me every single available *Star Wars* item manufactured to that point, I had dozens of such proofs-of-purchase. I followed the given directions and a few weeks later received my figure, someone or something called Boba Fett. I did not seem to remember him from the Christmas special, which I know I must have watched, and I could only guess whether he was intended to be a villain or a hero or a robot or a man. Here was a perplexing fusion of elements: Boba Fett wore a jetpack (only a hero would possess such an inherently heroic device) but also a spooky helmet (only a villain would have a spooky helmet), a short, medieval cape (hero) but also a personal missile launcher (villain). Now, I was a highly particular boy when it came to my toys. I did not enjoy playing with other children because other children did not play correctly. They did not know the rules. They broke character. Worse, they were not even aware when they broke character. They did plainly stupid things, such as forcing Leia to hump Chewbacca or allowing Darth Vader to make ridiculous undignified statements or, worst of all, they would put *swears* in the mouths of my action figures. (I once ended a friendship when a playmate had an Imperial Stormtrooper inexcusably if accurately refer to C-3PO as a “Rebel faggot.”) The only curses used in the films were “damn” and “hell”—Han Solo, both times—and thus “damn” and “hell” were the only swears I would allow to intrude into my insanely meticulous re-creation of the *Star Wars* universe. I suspect, then, that I took my Boba Fett action figure and placed it somewhere appropriately reverent, uncertain yet of Boba Fett’s power or allegiance, waiting for the new film—only one year away now!—to guide my use of it.

(Many remember this Boba Fett action figure with similar lucidity. Many even remember its gnarliest feature: the ability to shoot

the red plastic missile from the personal missile launcher strapped to Fett's back. The problem with this memory is that one could *not* shoot the missile from Boba Fett's personal missile launcher. I have friends who claim to remember launching Boba Fett's missile as clearly as they remember the attempted Reagan assassination, their maiden voyage upon two bicycle wheels, and their nervous breakdown upon first seeing *Gremlins*. I am sorry, but the rocket did not fire. It is apparently enough of an urban legend to have moved *starwars.com* to issue a public statement denying that Kenner *ever* released a missile-launching Boba Fett. Kenner had *planned* to do so until some similar rocket-launching *Battlestar Galactica* toys appeared the season before Boba Fett's unveiling and raised an unholy child-safety ruckus.)

For all this, who or what exactly Boba Fett is remains unclear. *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* will, reportedly, clear up many such questions and feature a long sequence of Boba Fett as a child, revealing his human identity. (Also, in what is almost certainly one of the perfectly baseless rumors in which the Internet specializes in spawning, martial artist-cum-action star Jet Li is said to be slated to play Fett in *Episode III*.) Fett's past and origins are so inchoate, in fact, that he is less a blank slate than a nonexistent slate: one does not overwrite the little that exists but creates a new template from imaginative scratch. One strange bit of essayistic driftwood floating through the Internet is entitled "On Behalf of a Female Boba Fett," which argues that *Star Wars* "needs another female and that . . . female can and should be Boba Fett." To cross such a casting Rubicon, the unsigned essay holds, would "provide evidence that women can serve a cinematic purpose other than romance and reproduction." One wonders if it is despite of or due to Fett's marginality that he has come to be regarded by some of *Star Wars*' loonier fans as a figure of nearly messianic importance.

The writer Susan Mayse, in her brief but insightful essay "The Tao of Boba Fett," remarks that Fett is "the unknowable *Star Wars* character—we learn nothing about his part, we never see his face, he spends minutes on the screen . . . yet he delivers mythic presence." Unlike the "other marquee characters the marketers

carefully groomed for stardom," Fett has unexpectedly emerged as a figure Mayse nicely calls "the polarizing neutral." And if by mythic Mayse means a character whose utility is outpaced by portrayal, which is in turn outpaced by public reception, Boba Fett has indeed become mythic. Perhaps most shocked by Boba Fett's unlikely popularity is his creator, George Lucas: "I'm mystified by it," Lucas once said. But we should not read too much into Lucas's mystification. After all, for every Boba Fett and Han Solo and Darth Maul to spill brilliantly from Lucas's skull, there has come behind them a Droopy McCool, a Jar Jar Binks, a Salacious Crumb. An imagination of such off-the-charts inconsistency should hardly be asked to judge, much less surmise, the popularity of its own creations.

Though no less an authority than Lucas himself has maintained that Boba Fett was killed when he plunged into the belly of the sarlaac, the bounty hunter quickly saw extrafilmic resurrection following *Return of the Jedi*. (Though it is a little hard to imagine, given the sarlaac's CGI enhancements in the *Jedi* Special Edition, how one could survive being swallowed by its beaky and altogether nasty-looking new mouth.) But as the Gospel According to Mark says that the two Marys arrived at Jesus' tomb to find a young man in a white robe inside, whereas the Gospel According to Luke says that the Marys were greeted by *two angels* inside the tomb, whereas the Gospel According to John has Mary Magdalene arriving at the tomb *alone* and going back to fetch Simon-Peter without even *looking* inside, the resurrection of Boba Fett has seen its own mutually exclusive permutations. Fett's first resurrection, back in #81 of the old Marvel *Star Wars* comic book and inexactly recalled here from memory, came when the sarlaac, unable to digest Mandalorian armor, vomited up Boba Fett onto the sands of Tatooine. Fett wandered into a nearby settlement and ran into Han Solo—Solo was on Tatooine doing one thing or another—and Fett, in a badly amnesiac state, befriended Solo and aided him in his mission. That is, until Fett regained his memory and tried to kill Solo as they were charging out-of-control in a Jawa sandcrawler toward (wouldn't you know it!) the sarlaac. Solo tried to save Fett, but understandably

gave up when Fett started shooting at him. Solo jumped off the sandcrawler, leaving Fett trapped inside, and the whole megillah plunged into that most oddly vaginal of *Star Wars* monsters. (Though if the sarlaac was too dainty to digest some freaking armor, how on earth is it supposed to digest an entire all-terrain vehicle?) Fett's file at starwars.com provides Resurrection Number Two. Here, we learn that Fett was seized by the sarlaac's numerous suckers and fiendishly kept alive while being digested, thus explaining *Jedi's* theoretically impossible punishment of being digested by the sarlaac for "over a thousand years." Fett nearly lost his mind, it is related, as his body flooded with the sarlaac's toxins, but soon managed to blast his way out, get rescued and nursed back to health by fellow bounty hunter Dengar, and return to hunt Han Solo again, most significantly in the groundbreaking Dark Horse Comics series *Dark Empire*, which is almost certainly too good to be spoiled for readers here.

In fact, the numerous comic books devoted to Boba Fett's bounty-hunting exploits is where he has achieved his greatest popularity. It is in these stories, more importantly, where Fett grows closest to what his fans most want him to be. In Dark Horse Comics' *Death, Lies, & Treachery* (story by John Wagner, art by Cam Kennedy), we find Fett at an undisclosed point in the *Star Wars* time line, presumably before *A New Hope*. Someone called Gorga the Hutt, perhaps an ancestral relation of Jabba the Hutt's and a gangster with whom Fett shares a professional attachment, falls in love with Anarcho, the daughter of Orko the H'uun—a sworn enemy of Gorga's, unfortunately. What is a H'uun? We are told they are of a "low caste"—lower, that is, than the Hutts. Well, whatever, but Orko and Anarcho look more or less exactly like Gorga. (One really misses George Lucas's gigantic gift for nomenclature in these comics. *Gorga?* *Anarcho?*) At any rate, Gorga the Hutt decides that to win Anarcho's small, chubby hand he will need Orko the H'uun's blessing. As it happens, one of Orko's merchant vessels has recently been raided and robbed by a galactic pirate known as Bar-Kooda. How better than to secure Orko's badly needed connubial approval than to provide him with Bar-Kooda's

scalp? And who else to serve as the tomahawk but the trusted Boba Fett?

Cut to Fett in a speeder-bike chase through some anonymous wasteland peopled by lots of runty little creatures. (In the *Star Wars* universe—whether film or comic or video game—there are precious few modes of production design: the clean totalitarianism of Imperial milieus, the naturalistically gritty mode of worlds like Hoth and Dagobah, and the repellent-muppet mode of Mos Eisley and Jabba's palace. To imagine the particulars of the latter one needs only to summon the snot-glistening nostrils of a Gamorrean Guard or the slobbering jaws of the rancor. This *Dark Crystal*ish mode also unfortunately tends to be really overused and its entertainment value *really* overestimated in the *Star Wars* universe, and it is a shame that in his exploits Boba Fett is so often exiled to the environs least appreciated by *Star Wars* fans born before 1990.) Fett's prey in this chase are, apparently, four intergalactic hoboes, the first three of whom Fett finishes off, effortlessly, on the fly. The last of them he chases into a bar, whereupon entering Fett announces: "I trust no one has given this fugitive succor?" Anyone with an even shallow understanding of Boba Fett would not be blamed for thinking, "Succor?" A few panels later Fett barks, "Guard your tongue!" This high-strung bitchiness makes him sound less like the most fearsome headhunter in the galaxy and more like he has just stepped out of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*.

It should be said that Boba Fett kills a lot of people in these comics, and that they are always scared, awful, ugly, *bad* people. The mercenary code, when elucidated by a mercenary we are clearly intended to root for, invariably holds that murder is a chilly, unthrilling business best left to professionals. (For a more compelling rendering of this tiresome stance, see Luc Besson's film *The Professional*.) Fett is introduced in one comic thusly: "Throughout the vast reaches of the galaxy—wherever fugitives met or law-breakers conspired—one name was always uttered in hushed tones." Cut to Boba Fett shooting a whole bunch of people ("Ah!

Boba Fett!"). In *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, though, Boba Fett is not presented this way at all. Han Solo even calls Boba Fett a "twerp" in *A New Hope's* Special Edition. Boba Fett is, in fact, clearly and most definitely a villain, responsible for stealing away the films' most appealing character (that is, until his monumentally crappy showing in *Jedi*): Han Solo. I, for one, as a Solo-loving six-year-old, *hated* Boba Fett. I did not find him interesting. He was not forbidden fruit. He was, rather, an admittedly cool-looking but completely evil scalawag who had, to my trauma, frozen and abducted my favorite character in all of film and kept him on ice for *three fucking years*.

That is not the Boba Fett at issue here. Fett in extrafilmic appearances is, again, rather like Christ in his extrabiblical stories. Both are always more manly, more purposeful, their meaning more evident. If Jesus' message can barely be grasped from a lone reading of, say, the Gospel According to Mark, then Boba Fett's essential nature is as difficult to understand based on *Empire* and *Jedi* alone. In the comics, though, everyone knows Boba Fett on sight ("Boba Fett! Oh no!"), just as everyone instantly knows Jesus, which is not necessarily the case in the gospels. Whether consciously or unconsciously, these stories seem most interested in addressing how their central character has grown beyond the demarcations of the original narrative. Some fictional characters, it seems, are simply too *big*. They welcome addition, subtraction, clarification, filigree. One thinks of Beowulf, or Ahab, or Huck Finn. Artists and writers go back and reanimate and enlarge these characters time and again because, through some magic confluence, they mean so much *more* than the typographical marks that signify them. This is a rare and magical thing, and it is interesting that science fiction in general and the *Star Wars* films in particular are, for whatever reason, blessed with a surfeit of such characters.

In *Death, Lies, & Treachery*, Fett eventually makes his way to Bar-Kooda with the help of a character named Magwit the Magician. Magwit is a former employee of Bar-Kooda—who as it turns out

is a gigantic, sperm whale-headed dude and, I think, completely visually inappropriate for the *Star Wars* universe, at least as I understand it—and Fett cunningly uses that connection to smuggle himself aboard Bar-Kooda's ship, the *Bloodstar*. After a series of magic-related adventures too tedious to recount, Fett fights and kills Bar-Kooda. (Unfortunately not before Bar-Kooda yells, "You're dead meat, Boba Fett!" "Many have tried," Fett answers while simultaneously dealing Bar-Kooda his mortal blow, "none have succeeded!") Fett turns Bar-Kooda in to Gorga the Hutt, and this strand of the story ends on a really unbelievably grisly note: Bar-Kooda's parboiled, smoking, ready-to-be-eaten-yet-still-recognizably-humanoid body on Gorga the Hutt's table. He has even got an apple wedged in his mouth. George Lucas, meet Peter Greenaway.

The story continues: Ry-Kooda, Bar-Kooda's brother, comes after Fett for revenge, but Fett, of course, dispatches him too. Gorga then wants Orko killed, but Fett gets inexplicably squeamish. "You mean murder?" Fett asks. Gorga presses him: "You *do* do exterminations?" Fett: "If the terms are to my liking . . . perhaps." Earlier in the comic the guy whacks anyone who looks at him funny, and suddenly he has developed some rabbinically elaborate murder code?

Of course, Boba Fett is not squeamish. What is happening here is typical to the development of the mercenary, and this phony heavyheartedness is introduced not to preserve the fidelity of Boba Fett's character but to provide the audience with a reminder that our hero is, in fact, a decent sort, underneath it all. It is this *Soldier of Fortune*-type bullshit that endows the likes of Bo Gritz and Randy Weaver and Timothy McVeigh with such a knuckleheaded combination of bloodthirsty fanaticism and blubbery sentimentality. Fett, at any rate, declines to kill Orko the H'uun, letting the vengeful Ry-Kooda do it for him. He then kills Ry-Kooda ("A worthy foe. In many ways, to be admired.") and sneakily keeps the down payment on Orko's murder that Gorga already proffered. That's our boy.

Another of Boba Fett's more well known comic exploits can be found in *Enemy of the Empire* (story by John Wagner, art by Ian

Gibson, John Nadeau, and Jim Amash). This is another pre-*A New Hope* story that culminates in what an average *Star Wars* fan should regard as a wet dream. As the comic itself has it, this is “the never-before-told” story of that “murderous tryst” between Boba Fett and Darth Vader. (“Murderous tryst” sounds a little less apocalyptic than what one suspects the folks at Dark Horse were going for.) Before Vader and Fett are driven to gladiatorial combat, though, the pair meet to discuss the ostensible errand Vader would like Fett to complete. (It is unclear if this story accepts as canonical Fett’s first appearance in the *Star Wars* Christmas special.) Vader explains to Fett that his quarry is one Abal Karda, a colonel in the Imperial Lightning Brigade. It seems Karda has pulled a Kurtz and is hiding out somewhere with a small trunk whose contents Vader very much needs. He asks that Fett eliminate Karda and bring the trunk to him, unopened. “Sometimes,” Vader says, “ignorance is wisdom, Fett.” Fett, for his part, senses that his own death is pretty much preordained in this entire scenario, and quickly figures out how he will double-cross Vader and keep the trunk and its contents for himself.

After Fett leaves, Vader hires some assassins to track Fett and kill him when he attains the trunk. (Even a character as evil as Darth Vader develops in these comics some antihero scruples, berating the assassins for killing “innocent bystanders” on their prior mission. Nowhere else, of course, does Vader express the tiniest worries about innocent bystanders. Perhaps evil needs qualms when, as here, evil and its gradations are a story’s focus. Without placing a small moral speed bump across the antihero’s dark consciousness, it seems, one is left with *Henry: Portrait of a Serial Killer*.) After the assassins leave to hunt Boba Fett, Vader justifies to himself his strangely roundabout method of obtaining this valuable trunk by thinking: “Little do you dream of the value of what you seek, Boba Fett—and when you learn, you will never wish to part with it. That is why you must die.” Uh, yeah.

Anyhow, Fett tracks Karda to a planet called Port Esta. Here, as in other such comic books, we have some very non-*Star Wars*—

looking art. The Wookiee that Fett kills at Port Esta looks like nothing so much as a large yellow gerbil. The Imperial Lightning Brigade wears fatigues that do not at all jibe with standard Imperial design. The double lightning bolt chevron running down their sleeves is the most obvious howler. This manages (a) the impressive feat of making the Imperials-as-Nazis allegory even less subtle, and more significantly it is (b) a total break with the established methodology of Imperial ranking. Imperial Stormtroopers, it seems pretty clear, determine rank by whoever happens to be wearing the big orange shoulder pad. Imperial officers, on the other hand, determine rank by the red and blue (and in the case of a brass hat like Grand Moff Tarkin, red, blue, and yellow) insignia plaque on their chests. Admirals and Grand Moffs get twelve blocks, generals get eight blocks, captains and Moffs get six, and so on. (Rebel echelons are a little harder to make out, since they seem, by and large, a lot less uptight about the whole "rank" thing. Lando, remember, became a general after doing absolutely nothing. Although, in *Empire*, General Rieekan does wear an insignia plaque that bears a striking resemblance to the Ralston-Purina corporate logo.)

On Port Esta Fett learns of Karda's location and the probable contents of his trunk: it has something to do with a race of people called the Icarii, who are both precognitive and can, more interestingly, survive dismemberment. (I will spoil it for you: the trunk contains the head of a female Icarii—a really annoying one—and Vader wants this head to tell him the future, in particular how it relates to his and the Emperor's relationship, which from the looks of it had sprung some serious leaks long before Luke was even thinking about telling Uncle Owen to take one of his moisture vaporators and cram it sideways.) The story then follows Fett as he procures the trunk from Karda. In the process of fighting Karda for the trunk and its prophetic head, Fett tosses the colonel into a pool of boiling slag. Karda's death is handled pretty graphically, which goes along with the comic's uncommonly brutal depiction of Fett's ruthlessness: other than the face-shot Wookiee and the smelted Abal Karda, Fett scores no less than six kills (four of which are

the assassins Vader has hired to track Fett), including two out-and-out, face-to-face, gangland-style liquidations that move one to wonder just what is the appropriate age for these little funny books, anyhow?

Then Vader shows up, and the *real* story—the story promised in the title and on the cover—begins. Boba Fett in two-fisted, gadget-laden glory is a topic of near fetishistic fascination in *Star Wars* comics and novels. One can see why, as the films' only extended instance of Boba Fett in combat occurs in the already addressed sarlaac scene, which is, again, filmed by the late Richard Marquand in such a cramped, incompetent style that the scene, like drunken sex, quickly degenerates into something boundlessly disappointing, no matter how can't-miss an idea it must have initially seemed.

But before getting to *Enemy of the Empire's* Vader-Fett battle, I should really underscore *how* obsessed with a fighting Fett fans generally seem to be. In the *vastly* underrated Sony Playstation game "*Star Wars: Masters of Teras Käsi*," one can take control of one of twelve different *Star Wars* characters and basically beat the snot out of one's opponent, who is controlled by either the computer or a couchside companion. In a sociological triumph, the game keeps track of how often each character is selected. On my console, in ascending order of popularity, Darth Vader is selected 8 percent of the time, a Tusken Raider is selected 13 percent of the time, and Boba Fett is selected 57 percent of the time—and I am not even a qualified Boba Fett *fan*. Less anecdotally, this fascination extends into the Internet's oddest corners. One site (www.grudge-match.com) enshrines an interesting debate that argues, *Crossfire*-style, what would happen if Boba Fett and the Predator ever met in ■ dark alley. (The Predator, for those who don't remember, is the eponymous villain of the terrific 1987 John McTiernan film which starred Arnold Schwarzenegger, and a highly underrated 1990 sequel, a Danny Glover vehicle directed by Stephen Hopkins.) The argument provides a fascinating porthole into the extremely knowledgeable, developmentally arrested intellects of the sort of

people who go in for this stuff, and deserves to be addressed at some length. Fett's champion, Dave, feels that "Pred needs to check in with the optometrist. What kind of fool has thermal vision, but no *regular* vision? He's sure going to have trouble seeing Boba Fett. . . . Now, don't go telling me about how Predators fight Aliens and all that [*Predator* v. *Alien*, apparently the *Roe* v. *Wade* of www.grudge-match.com, has also been the subject of several comic books]. The *first* Alien was scary, but since then I see those things get mowed down in baker's dozens, by Winona Ryder no less." Joe, the site's Predator partisan, wonders how Dave "can say that having the skull of an ALIEN is not that big of a deal. These things have **ACID FOR BLOOD**. . . . The only time Aliens were EVER mowed down . . . was when they were up against an elite team of Marines and even then only one survived (this, of course, was due to the fact that he was Michael Biehn who is arguably the coolest person on the planet)." Joe, perhaps sensing how argumentatively rudderless things have gotten, resorts to more limpid logic: Boba Fett, he points out, has two accomplishments, one being that he "alertly points out that the *Millennium Falcon* is not a piece of trash" and "falls into that [sarlaac] pit thing." The Predator, on the other hand, in the first film "carves up an elite unit of special forces . . . and then destroys Mexico with a bomb on his arm," and in the second film "emasculates drug dealers, cops, federal agents AND Bill Paxton. . . . He is finally hurt badly (but not killed) by Sgt. Murtaugh." Dave sallies with the following: "Boba Fett: Defeated by combined forces of Jedi Knight, Indiana Jones, massive enraged Wookiee and smooth-talking con man. . . . Predator: defeated by *Jingle All the Way* costar. Defeated again by *Gone Fishin'* costar." Fett goes on to win 60 percent of the site's fan vote.

Now, before actually venturing into battle with Vader, Fett notes to himself that he "doesn't fear the Dark Lord, but only a fool seeks close combat with Darth Vader." It is hard to tell whether this is meant as a tongue-in-cheek moment—the clauses cancel each other out—but the fact remains that anything Fett does in comics such as *Enemy of the Empire* is typically lavished with every sort of

justification and asterisk. His fight with Vader is no exception. It may be that these types of maneuvers seek to prove Fett's essential thoughtfulness, or it may be that Fett needs to be shown as one who is constantly sizing up his given situation. But it is hard to imagine many other *Star Wars* characters whose motives need to be so relentlessly autopsied. In *Enemy of the Empire* Darth Vader is able to behave however he pleases. The comic versions of Han Solo or Luke Skywalker may think excessively to themselves—the interminable contents of thought bubbles is by far these comics' worst aspect—but those thoughts never come in the spirit of pushy authorial justification. Boba Fett seems not a character in so many of these stories but a series of affected poses. Perhaps this is the curse of a character of polarizing neutrality: his studied nature is both what makes him interesting and ultimately restricts his fictional possibilities.

Vader opens his battle with Boba Fett by using his lightsaber to chop Fett's speeder cycle in half ("Let us remove escape from the equation"), whereupon Fett opens fire upon Vader with his wrist blaster. Vader, in turn, blocks the shots with his lightsaber. Finally, Vader ricochets one of Fett's wrist blasts back at him, winging him in the head. Behind the combatants is a cliff overlooking a magmatic ocean of slag, and Fett—holding the trunk while fighting off a sudden burst of Vader's Jedi mind trickery—jumps backwards off the cliff's edge, which recalls Luke's suicide fall in *Empire*. "The fool!" Vader calls, rushing to the edge. Fett, of course, is hovering there, jetpack blazing. He shoots Vader in the face, and Vader drops his lightsaber and collapses. "I win," Fett says, alighting beside Vader. Vader, who at this point is done fucking around, begins to crush Fett's heart with Jedi telekinetics. Fett, for once, turns contrite: "My Lord, we should not be at odds. . . . Let us remove the cause of our dispute." With that, Boba Fett kicks the head-containing trunk off the side of the cliff. Vader, who has only so much Force to go around, it seems, levitates the trunk back into his arms while Fett gets away. The fight is all for naught, however, in that Vader has to crush the decapitated, truth-telling Icarian head

when she prophesizes that her power will come between Vader and the Emperor, while Fett, for his part, has a chance to kill Vader as he is levitating the trunk, but as he himself says at story's end, "Where's the profit in that?"

A lot of these Fett stories end on such relentlessly ambivalent notes. Fett doesn't quite win, doesn't quite lose. There is always a lot of drollery about how Fett has secretly managed to steal some tiny spoil of war, winkingly revealed in the final panel ("And his time had not been entirely wasted," concludes one; "And he doubts his owner will miss it," concludes another). Why, one wonders, such narratively hedged bets? I think it is because the victory of the mercenary means the loss of civilization, since mercenaries can be bought and civilization at its most ideal exists beyond such taxable realms. If history teaches us anything about mercenaries, it is that mercenaries are admirable in the abstract and totally awful in the actual, Hessians and Contras being two vivid cases in point. The ambivalence of art devoted to mercenaries is best shown in how it can never seem to actually award them a brimming war chest. By withholding nothing from mercenaries but decisive victory, such art places its visible loyalties on the side of civilization but its deeper sympathies on the side of the mercenary. One sees this sort of thing all the time in the thought of the Too Left: the same people who frame posters of Che Guevara, admire the Cossack-executing Lenin, and read without blinking Marx's most egregious justifications of class-based violence will gnash and foam at the thought of the United States using force to pursue its interests or secure its protection. Not that they feel strongly enough about it to revolt, mind you. By doing nothing but complaining they remain citizens of civilization, but in the weathered backpack of the mercenary their truest, most secret hearts travel. The nice thing about this psychological arrangement is that the mercenary so rarely wins that one's final loyalty is left blissfully unchallenged, and it is upon this vexing moral seam where Boba Fett gains his admirers and popularity. We are *happy* that he bested Darth Vader, happy that he got away, and happy, most of all, that he didn't actually win.

* * *

Star Wars is many things to many people. Some see it as an antifascist fable. Some see it—inexplicably, in my view—as a *protofascist* fable, evidenced by the Force-as-controlling-influence and especially by Luke's rejection of soulless technology in his bid to destroy the Death Star at the conclusion of *A New Hope*. But what no one seems to comment upon are the films' many excursions into the grayer world between these two poles. Lucas very clearly loves the world of "scum and villainy" Alec Guinness's Ben Kenobi derides: bounty hunters, smugglers, and the Bedouinlike Tusken Raiders all send his imagination into hyperspace and reap some of its most substantial visual rewards. The mighty Force is of scant comfort in such chaotic realms, as Luke discovers in the Mos Eisley saloon, watching gentle, kindly old Ben use his lightsaber to disembowel one fellow and dismember another. Lingering in the gray seems like a very American fascination, and while Fett's Japanese fans see him essentially as an honorable samurai, Jeremy Bulloch, the British actor who portrayed him, feels that Fett's stock is more strictly Western, in both senses: "I modeled Boba very seriously on Clint Eastwood in *A Fistful of Dollars*," he told the *Web* magazine the *11th Hour* a few years ago. "It's exactly that, but in armor. . . . I found with Boba Fett, the less I do, the better. He stands in a certain way. He cradles his gun—he loves it. And he's always ready."

Bulloch has had some time to think about this. Despite a long career—including playing Hamlet at nineteen, serving as Q's assistant in the James Bond films, and a recurring role in the inexplicably popular British sci-fi series *Doctor Who*—Bulloch has accepted that the basis of his fame is a character whose amazing voice doesn't even belong to him but to an actor named Jason Wingreen, whose face we never see and whom Bulloch spent a two-film total of four weeks before a camera portraying. (In the Special Edition of *A New Hope*, it is not Bulloch but various Industrial Light & Magic artists within Fett's armor.) "When I got it," Bulloch has explained, "I knew it was . . . not a very big part. And then Irvin Kershner said, 'Now this is your big scene with the bounty hunters. You've got

Dengar and Bossk and the others, but Boba Fett is the main one.' And I said, 'Oh, is he?'" (More rabid fans of Boba Fett might be interested to know that the man who portrayed him pays his bills in lean acting times by interior decorating.) Bulloch has also lamented how heavy and awkward Fett's backpack was, how Fett's helmet largely eliminated human vision, and how he had to count his steps in every scene in order to hit his marks and not fall down, which he did anyway, repeatedly. Do such disintegrating particulars change our thoughts about Boba Fett? Do they somehow leach away his mythic stature?

American intellectuals from Emerson to Dwight Macdonald to Susan Sontag have pissed and moaned about the refusal of mass culture to indulge in the messy questions of True Art. Mass culture, Macdonald wrote in his landmark essay "Masscult & Midcult," "offers its customers neither an emotional experience nor an aesthetic experience, for these demand effort. . . . It asks nothing of its audience . . . and it gives nothing." But what is one to make of a culture that loves pop movies and pop novels and pop music and pop art devoted to the exploits of the loose cannon, the mercenary, the murderer-poet, the bounty hunter, the Batcave vigilante? Such art actually asks quite a lot of its audience, I think: What kind of a hero do we really want? Does it matter if he or she violates agreed-upon social contracts? What is justice, and by whom is it best executed? Are those who administer justice according to some private cosmology ever to be trusted? While the *Star Wars* films may themselves never directly pose such questions, Boba Fett and his strange popularity certainly do, and they are not insignificant in a culture of teenage suburban assassins, death- and ducat-worshipping gangbangers, an extreme Right which kills to protect unborn life and kills to revenge those killed, and an extreme Left either unwilling or unable to imagine a situation in which the justice of a democratic nation-state is preferable to that of fascist Islamists. One finds particles of mercenary romance in each of the above scenarios, and in each the mercenary becomes the vicarious dark half of otherwise polite society.

And if society tends to get the government, architecture, and

mercenaries it deserves, it is all the more reason to think hard about those homegrown renegades we most esteem. If Boba Fett serves as a lightning rod for anything more significant than admiration of his arresting costume and four gritty lines of dialogue, perhaps it is as the embodiment of our third-wave, superpowerless anxiety, which long predates the events of September 11, 2001. Here, our politics do not begin to address our fears, our fears can no longer be held at bay by money and distance, and we know that there exists someone, somewhere, not that far away and not at all long ago, capable of inflicting upon us massive amounts of pain or securing for us a ferocious measure of justice. The trouble is, only he gets to decide which one we have coming.



DAGOBAB, NEBRASKA

DAN BARDEN

[1]

I remember the summer of 1980 for two reasons. It was when *The Empire Strikes Back* was released, and it was when my friend Andy (not his real name) and I hitchhiked from California to Boston. We saw *Empire* near the middle of our trip, in Salt Lake City, and forever in my mind the two things will be connected: hitchhiking with Andy and Luke's journey toward discovering that Darth Vader is his father.

My traveling buddy was something of a Wookiee: with Andy at 6'6" and me at 6'3", I sometimes wonder why anyone picked us up. We set out on a beautiful day, our first ride across the Sierras in the back of a pickup. Andy had seen *Empire* the day before we left, and he tortured me for two days before Utah over "the secret."

The end of our first day was at the Mustang Ranch, a legal brothel near Reno. I'd like to believe that it was then, sleeping beside the brothel parking lot, when Andy first mentioned it. Andy had enjoyed himself at the whorehouse—he was actually *whistling a happy tune*—but I'd had a problem with, ah, *finishing*. I've never been, thank God, to a prostitute again. We threw down our sleeping

bags beside the road and he asked me something like *Do you want to know something about the movie that you might not want to know?* I'm certain the sentence was convoluted by his desire to both tell the secret and keep it.

Andy had been having trouble before I invited him on the trip. A brilliant young man and the best basketball player I've ever known, he'd been to something like five colleges without getting a degree. I had originally planned to take the trip by myself, but at my sister's high school graduation, while, no doubt, promoting my new adventure, I realized exactly how scared I was. California coastal roads were one thing, but the Midwest was quite another. I've seen pictures of my twenty-year-old self on that day and I looked *manic*. When I found Andy I'm sure I presented the idea as a way to end his troubles. I think I got him at exactly the right moment. The Force was strong with me.

[2]

Leigh Brackett is credited as a screenwriter of *Empire*, working from a story by Lucas. In the continuing colonization of my imagination, an important flag was planted by Howard Hawks with *Rio Bravo*. Brackett—a woman—wrote that script as well, and the movie is one I think about as much as I think about *Empire*. She is also credited (along with William Faulkner) on Hawks's *The Big Sleep* as well as Robert Altman's revisionist look at Raymond Chandler's *The Long Goodbye*. She wrote the first draft of *Empire* just before she died of cancer. (Subsequent drafts were written by then-young buck Lawrence Kasdan.)

Rio Bravo is a Western about a drunk—played brilliantly by Dean Martin—who redeems himself. It's also a story about the strength of his friends who *allow him* to redeem himself. It's a great action movie—one of the best ever—but it essentially comes down to John Wayne wondering whether his best buddy has the *cojones* to put down the bottle while both of them are besieged by bad guys. I enjoy thinking that this was Leigh Brackett's contribution to

the script because it seems like a womanly concern—watching men support each other—but Brackett has said that Hawks wanted that, too.

[3]

Wookiees that we were, we spent many hours on the side of the road. Hitchhiking compels you to find new places within yourself. A few months before this trip, I had heard God's voice beside a road in Ukiah simply because there was nothing else to do *but* hear God's voice (He told me what He often tells me: *you'll be okay*). After Andy and I had talked about everything we could possibly talk about, we talked about everything else. We made up silly songs about hitching a ride. We decided that I would try to guess the secret of *Empire*.

I tried. I got stuck on the notion that it must be about Princess Leia or that it involved the death of a major character. We had agreed that Andy would not give me any hints, though, and I ran out of ideas pretty quickly.

In spite of my frustration, those first days of our trip were blissful. There's no other word for it. For a while, too, it seemed like I'd put an end to Andy's troubles. On the road, it turned out, he had a light spirit. We wrote a song about it that I still remember:

Happy to ride
In the back of your truck
It's a long hard haul
But we're fucked up
We've got bourbon
Enough for three
If you'll just stop
To let us pee

Finally, in the day before we saw *The Empire Strikes Back* in Salt Lake City, I gave Andy permission to ruin the movie for me. Go

head, tell me. I never would have guessed it, and yet it made perfect sense. Even as we waited in line on those impossibly clean streets with those impossibly well-mannered teenagers, that thought balloon was still hovering above my head: *Darth Vader is Luke's father?* Andy had robbed me of the surprise, but he had left me with the majesty. He had tried to explain to me the context of the "there is another" bit, but he screwed that up, and I didn't understand until I saw the movie.

The Empire Strikes Back, however, was not a joyous experience for me. Which is not to say that it was a *bad* experience. Walking from the theater, I felt like my imagination had been imploded. And this had nothing to do with the "secret" of the movie. I had been disturbed by the way the movie started, and I was even more disturbed by the way it ended. Luke begins maimed and ends up even more maimed. Did we really have to wait three years for all this to be resolved? There's a *reality* at work in *Empire* that is absent—and *should be* absent—from the rest of the trilogy. Cutting off Luke's hand, I have to say, wouldn't have been any more shocking to me if it had been his penis.

[4]

In some sense, it *was* Luke's penis. *Empire* was the film, remember, where Luke is revealed as a eunuch. Was there any doubt left that our boy would not be getting the only girl left in the galaxy? That look on Carrie Fisher's face when Han is frozen always kills me. It's clear that Skywalker is alone with nothing to look forward to but completing his Jedi training. Without a hand. And with a face that doesn't look quite right.

That's another thing. Let's talk about Mark Hamill's face. As legend has it, he suffered a car accident between the filming of *Star Wars* and *Empire*. I say "legend" because the Internet message boards are divided on this issue. The way I heard it, the wampa sequence at the start of *Empire* was necessary because it accounted

for the changes in Luke's face. *Something* happened. Hamill's skin looked like it had been scoured by bad dreams, as though he had been melted and recast in a different form. His cheekbones were in different places. He looked damaged.

The Empire Strikes Back is a story about failure. In Luke's case, a very particular kind of failure. He loses sight of the big picture and therefore jeopardizes the entire rebellion. He abandons his Jedi training in order to help his friends, and his friends end up in *worse* shape. The movie ends with Han in the clutches of Boba Fett, and it's a real question as to whether Luke's going to pull his head out enough to help him. *Join me, Luke. It is your destiny.*

[5]

A few days after watching *The Empire Strikes Back* in Salt Lake City, we got picked up by two pretty girls from the University of Wyoming who were returning home to Nebraska. As soon as we got into that car, we knew we'd made a mistake. They offered us pot and they offered us booze. And then they offered us more of both. And then more. And then even more. I have a foggy memory of one of them leaning over the bench seat of their old car—a Fairlane or a Rambler or something—and asking us if we were “lightweights.” There was nothing on that Nebraska horizon for hours but that horrible question. *Are you guys lightweights? I didn't think there were any lightweights in California.* Andy and I smoked and smoked, drank and drank, smoked and smoked. But then, at a certain point, we had to stop. This part of the story still embarrasses me. In some ways, I remain that twenty-year-old who was proudest of his capacity for self-abuse. I don't remember us ever *stopping* before. And then they asked us the question again. *Are you guys lightweights?* Maybe it was the half week on the road. Maybe it was all the drugs and drinking we'd *already* done. We just had to say, “no more.”

We immediately began plotting our escape. We both did that

lifted-eyebrows, these-chicks-are-crazy thing which was inadequate camouflage for the fact that we both knew we *were* punking out on the drugs and booze, that they had emasculated us, fragile creatures, by insisting that we do more.

We ended up at some huge Gilley's-like country-western bar, a warehouse filled with drinking and dancing Stetsons. We had eaten hamburgers, and it was already dark. The girls seemed to *like* us, but in some perverse way that I did not understand. They kept asking us bizarre questions that were in some distant way pertinent: *You guys aren't Democrats, are you? Do you know any homosexuals? What's the deal with that?* They never left us alone long enough to talk, and Andy and I were trying to be gentlemen by not just ditching them. Our situation, I have to imagine, was complicated by extreme drunkenness. *Listen, Ladies, it's been nice to meet you, but we'd love to go sleep under that freeway bridge now.* We tried to get each other alone. I winked and went to the bathroom, but Andy didn't follow me. I came back from the bathroom and then Andy went. So, then *I* followed *him*. But he was gone. I couldn't find him. Anywhere.

[6]

A comparison between Dean Martin and Mark Hamill might seem a stretch, but there's nothing more shocking to me in *Empire* than what a prick Luke turns out to be. His contempt for Yoda, his wimpiness during his Jedi training, his terrible defiance of his master in leaving Dagobah—it's really quite shocking. Lucas must have imagined that the clouds of glory trailing from the destruction of the Death Star would get young Skywalker over the hump, but I remain unconvinced.

The Empire Strikes Back, it seems to me, has similar concerns as *Rio Bravo*. Yoda does what he can to see that Luke will recover from his selfishness and shortsighted goals to become the man who can save the galaxy from Darth Vader, but whereas John Wayne was successful with Dean Martin, Yoda was *not* successful with

Luke. Luke leaves the Dagobah system on his dubious quest to keep his friends from pain as Yoda warns him that “he would destroy all for which they have fought and suffered.” And then, if that weren’t enough, we’re given the conversation between Yoda and the ghost of Ben Kenobi in the moment after Luke leaves: *there is another*. Forgive me for complaining about a movie that I dearly love, but wouldn’t that be a little like John Wayne sobering up Dean Martin, sending him into a gunfight, and then telling Walter Brennan, “Don’t worry about it, if this guy doesn’t pan out, we can always get Sinatra”?

[7]

I looked everywhere for Andy. And then I went back for the girls and *we all* looked everywhere for Andy. I don’t remember the name of that Nebraska town, but it was small, and it *scared me* that we couldn’t find him. His mother had given me this look at my sister’s graduation—a look of *please don’t*—and I was already imagining having to call her. I felt like I was down behind enemy lines, and I couldn’t help but think that some redneck had forced Andy to admit he’d voted for Carter. And then bashed his head in.

After we’d searched the town until we couldn’t stand, I spent the night at the girls’ house. Their concern for Andy had instantly humanized them for me. When I woke up the next morning, I had the simple epiphany that if Andy were still alive, there was only one place he would likely be: *in a motel*.

When I walked into the motel room to find Andy lying in a comfortable bed, watching cartoons, I was filled with such rage and righteousness. He explained that he’d wandered off because he thought that I wanted to sleep with one of the girls, and he just needed to get away from them. And then he got lost.

There’s a moment near the start of *Rio Bravo* when John Wayne looks at Dean Martin with deep disgust. Yoda also does a pretty good job—for a puppet—of showing his disappointment with Luke. This was my moment with Andy. I think I imagined that I

had done him a great favor by bringing him on the trip. Was this how he repaid me? Andy's new happiness was fragile—I must have known that—but I ignored his fragility. I needed to punish him.

I shouted. I asked him what the *hell* he thought he was doing. I asked him how he could be so *stupid*. I told him that we couldn't continue the trip because I couldn't *depend* on him. Because I couldn't *trust* him. I said it again: *I can't trust you*. I told myself that I was protecting him from his own stupidity, but it was much more disgusting than that. I had offered him the Jedi training, I had given him the Deputy Sheriff's badge, and now I was telling him that he didn't deserve either. I was such an unbelievable dick. I don't think I ever realized what a dick I was until this moment.

So we hitched one last ride to Omaha, and from there we took a bus to Boston. My friendship with Andy ended at the same moment as our trip. We pretended we were friends for about a decade after that, but it was never the same—no more “happy to ride.” Eventually, he stopped talking to me, and he refused to tell me why. I knew why.

[8]

Return of the Jedi was downgraded, you remember, from *Revenge of the Jedi*. I couldn't help but see it as a recognition of Luke's diminished power. Does anyone remember what Luke did in that movie? As the new title suggests, his main job seems to be *showing up*. At the end of the trilogy, he is even more spectral than Ben Kenobi. Ultimately, it's the Ewoks who destroy the empire.

[9]

In the days after Salt Lake City, I felt betrayed to discover that my impulse to make Luke the hope of the galaxy may have been misplaced. *That* bit of information—“there is another”—ruined my

day even more than the idea that Luke had washed out of Jedi training or that Darth was his father. For me, that was the most radical thing about the film. Not that Luke might be turned to the dark side (that might have been *cool*). What bothered me was the idea that he might no longer be the protagonist. That didn't seem right to me. So much had depended on him.

I teach creative writing, and there's nothing that my students love more than a trick ending, although I do my best to dissuade them. Looking at *The Empire Strikes Back* from a distance of twenty-one years, I'm much more surprised by Luke's defiance of Yoda than I am by Luke's father. I'm happy to be able to report to my students that the big secret of *Empire* doesn't amount to much. The reason that none of the actors guessed it is because it's not essential to the structure of the story. At best, it's a sideshow to the real questions, which will *not* be answered by the end of the movie: does Luke have the *cojones* to save the galaxy? And if he doesn't, who will?

CELEBRATING THE FIFTIETH ANNIVERSARY
OF CATCHER IN THE RED-EYE:

Episode IV:
A New Goddamn Hope

NEAL POLLACK

[EDITOR'S NOTE: Since nameless parties within the Republic may be conspiring against this story, which is a parody, we have opted to change the names of the central characters, and of almost everything else, lest we face a lawsuit that will rob us of everything we've worked so hard to achieve. So remember that if the names seem like rip-offs of an old Mad magazine cartoon, but lamer, it's not our fault. May the Farce be with you.]

If you really want to hear this story, the first thing you should know is that it takes place during a period of civil war, for Chrissake. Rebel spaceships, striking from a crappy hidden base on some phony planet, have won their first victory against the evil Galactic Empire, but the whole thing bores me, if you want to know the truth. As for me, you sure as hell don't want to hear *my* whole goddamn tale of woe or all that Clown Wars hero crap. So I'll spare you most of the details. I'll just tell you about the stuff that happened around the time I met old Osama bin Kenobi, which eventually led to the part where my father cut off my hand and I had to come down to this crumby floating space hospital to take it easy. Sure, I

could be flying around the goddamn galaxy, trying to exercise my Red-Eye *powers* and all that kind of garbage, but who needs the hassle? Sometimes, I swear I'm smarter than everyone else in the universe.

Anyway, where I want to start telling is the day Uncle Omen and I bought a couple of goddamn androids. We lived on Tattooyou. You've probably heard of it, especially if you read magazines about godforsaken desert planets where there's nothing to do all day. That planet is strictly for the birds, I'm telling you. If there's a bright center of the universe, then Tattooyou is the planet that it's farthest from. Nobody good has ever come from there, except for maybe me, but like I'm so goddamn special.

This big enormous thing pulls up outside our house, sort of like a truck but it doesn't have any wheels, and all these Jewas start swarming around, wearing their little brown burlap sacks. I swear, sometimes Jewas bug the hell out of me, they really do. Then my Aunt Beirut says, "Puke, tell Uncle Omen if he gets a translator, make sure he speaks Bocce." I had to take Bocce in school for three years, and I never saw any goddamn use for it. Why can't people all just speak English, like the rest of the galaxy? That's what I say, and anyone who disagrees with me is full of horse manure.

So we get down there, and Uncle Omen says he needs an android who understands the binary language of moisture vaporators. Whatever the hell those are. He picks out this golden one, P-PBO, standing there with his big eyes, all scrawny and faggy. That android had this really awful English accent. It was a put-on, I'm telling you. He was a big phony. I can't stand phony androids, I swear. Most of them are so fake, you can't trust a word they're saying. Then my uncle picks out another android, a little red R-P-OO unit, and it just blows up right there in my face! Goddamn cheap Jewas. So we take this other one, this blue one, and then my uncle tells me to take them to the garage and clean them up. I was all excited to go into Toshi station and pick up some power converters. Instead I had to spend a whole night with a couple of goddamn faggy androids. I sure was sore.

* * *

So there I was, sitting with these androids in my crummy garage. It just wasn't fair! Ol' Jiggs was right, I was never gonna get out of there, not unless I could alter time or some crap like that, or speed up the goddamn harvest. Then that blue android starts playing a movie or something.

I swear to God, the girl in that movie was the best-looking goddamn girl I've ever seen, and I've seen some doozies, I'm telling you. I've never had sexual intercourse, except with my pillow, but I've thought about it a lot. One time I was necking with a girl out back of the greenhouse, and I swear I was going to have sexual intercourse with her or some such thing, but then Uncle Omen hit me on the back of the knee with a hoe and told me to get back to work.

But let's talk about this girl. She was a peach! I'm a sucker for a girl in a veil. So I asked that phony yellow android who she was, but he said he didn't know. I sat there and watched her say, "Help me, Osama bin Kenobi, you're my only hope," over and over again. I didn't know who this Osama bin Kenobi was. There was Old Bin Kenobi, this strange hermit who lived over by the Dune Sea, but why the hell would he have two names anyway?

The girl was pretty, and I really wanted to have sex with her. I had a big boner, actually, if you just have to know. I think about having sex all the time. I swear I do.

Then the movie stopped.

"Where'd she go?" I asked, but that stupid android just bleeped and bleeped, like a goddamn bleeping android.

That night at dinner, I asked Uncle Omen and Aunt Beirut if they knew Osama bin Kenobi. My uncle just about had two heart attacks when I mentioned his name. He said Osama bin Kenobi was dead, like my father. My aunt and uncle were nice and all, but they got awfully touchy when I talked about my father, like he was some sort of madman bent on ruling the universe or some such crap.

Anyway, Uncle Omen told me not to go looking for old Osama bin, that he wanted me on the south ridge working the credenzas.

"Aw, hell," I said. "If those androids work out, I wanna go to the Academy!"

I didn't eat another bite of dinner, I swear. Later I went to stand outside in the wind, like I do sometimes in the evenings. I had a pretty good tan and nice hair and all that, and I was wearing my favorite tunic, but who cares, for Chrissake? I wanted some adventure. This planet had two suns, but they were both stupid and boring.

I'm the most terrific driver you ever saw in your life. It's awful how good I am. If I'm on my way to town to pick up some irrigation equipment, I usually take my landspeeder through a canyon or some such place. If somebody tries to stop me, I'm liable to run him over like a womp rat. It's terrible.

When I woke up the next morning, I sure had a lot of goddamn driving to do. You see, that damn phony British android was all tizzied up because his little blue friend had split during the night.

"How's that?" I asked.

He was Master Puke-ing me and all that suck-up crap, but I just stuck him in the landspeeder and made tracks. That blue android was gonna cause me a lotta trouble. It may sound corny, but I cared about the cute little guy, really I did.

So we found him sure enough in the middle of this canyon, but there were all these sandpeople tracks around and I could see a couple of Mentos. Why those damn sandpeople don't just ride horses is beyond me, I thought. Then this stinky sandperson was on top of me. Goddamn it, they were always barging in on me, trying to hit me with their sticks. They have all these stupid bandages on their face because they have acne something fierce. It's disgusting, really it is.

"For Chrissake, get off of me!" I said.

But the damn thing kept hitting me. What a pain in the ass. The sandpeople are a buncha phonies, and they knocked me out.

I swear to God I must have been unconscious for *days*. But when I came to, Bin Kenobi was hovering over me. He was about seventy years old, but he looked older than that, and he was wearing the same burlap sack that he'd had forever, it seemed like. Sometimes I wondered what old Bin was living for. He was all stooped over, and he had very terrible posture, and he didn't even have a woman by his side. When I'm old and living in the desert, I sure as hell am going to find a girl to cook me dinner. And she won't be a phony, neither. No sir.

"Boy, am I glad to see you!" I said.

"Tell me, young Puke," he said. "What brings you this way?"

"Of course, sir. Well, this goddamn android here says he was sent to look for Osama bin Kenobi."

Bin started going into this nodding routine. You never saw anyone nod in your whole entire life as much as old Bin Kenobi. I could never tell if it was because he was thinking, or because he was just a crazy old fart.

"Osama bin Kenobi," he said. "Osama. Now that's a name I've not heard in a long time."

Now, I didn't understand what he was talking about, partly because I was young and partly because I had a lousy education. You should know that I'm older now than I used to be, but I'm still just as good-looking. People say I still act like a kid, but I know I'm a kid, and I don't see what the hell is wrong with that. Just because I'm a Red-Eye Knight and all doesn't mean I can't act my age, for Chrissake.

So we went back to Bin's place to get away from the sandpeople and all that. He was reading *Tattooyou Week in Review* and there were all these mentholated nose drops all over the place. It was pretty depressing, like most places where old people live.

"Have a seat over here, boy," he said.

He meant next to him on the bed.

"I was once a Red-Eye Knight same as your father," he said.

"No shit?"

"Watch your language, young Puke."

"Yes, sir."

"He was the best star pilot in the galaxy. A good man."

Then all of a sudden Osama bin Kenobi, or whatever the hell his name is, went into this cabinet and gave me this goddamn sword made of light, and he told me that it was an elegant weapon for a more civilized age nonsense or some other guardian of the galaxy crap. Then he started going on about Ralph Nader, his former pupil, who betrayed and killed my father, blah blah, and he was seduced by the dark side of the Farce, which is some goddamn energy field that surrounds us and penetrates us and binds us together. Old people are always going on about history and how important the past is, but I don't see how any of it relates to me at all. Because my only goals are to fly a starfighter and have sex with as many women as possible before I die.

"What a load of crap!" I said.

That little android starting playing the video of that girl again, and I had to stand behind a pillar, my boner got so big. She was some sort of damn princess or something, and she needed Osama's help in the rebellion and wanted him to come to Alderman and save the universe, which is a bunch of nonsense if you stop to think about it.

Anyway, it took me about ten minutes to cool down after that, especially when I saw that she wore her hair in a bun. That look always drove me wild, I swear. Osama bin Kenobi said to me that I needed to learn the ways of the Farce and come with him to Alderman.

"Get lost, pal-o-buddy," I said. "Now don't get me wrong. I don't like the Empire. I hate it. But Alderman is such a long way from here. And besides, I hear it's full of phonies."

Well, you know what happened next. The goddamn imperial Stormdrainers killed a bunch of Jewas and burnt down my house and turned my aunt and uncle into a couple of stinking skeletons. What a stupid mess it all was. So I said to Osama bin Kenobi, "Sure, I'll come with you to Alderman. There's nothing here for me now." He actually seemed excited. You kind of had to feel sorry for the crazy sonofabitch.

* * *

It was still pretty early. I'm not sure what time it was, actually, because I don't have a watch. But it was definitely early enough for us to find a pilot to take us to Alderman. What the hell, Bin and I thought, and we went down to the Mos Def spaceport. I swear you won't find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy in the galaxy than Mos Def. What a dump! Bin said it could be rough, but I'm always ready for anything, so I fixed my hair and went in to see what was going on.

The cantina wasn't very crowded, but they gave us a lousy table in the back anyway. You should have seen what was in there! I was surrounded by jerky monsters, I'm not kidding. All those wolf-creatures, devils, and green globs of goo were a bunch of losers, if you ask me. At this other table, practically on *top* of us, this hammerhead kept trying to hit on some creature that looked like a penis covered with hair. What a disgusting phony, I swear. Some people have no taste. And the band was bad. I mean really putrid. They were just a bunch of cheap-looking dudes with big eyes playing their clarinets, as far as I could tell. I knew the song they were playing, "Little Shirley Beans," and it was a swell song, but they were just *murdering* it. They played it really brassy, but not good brassy, more like corny brassy, if you know what I mean.

I could tell right away that the bartender was a phony, too. He was one of those really suck-up bartenders who will kiss your ass if you're a bounty hunter or some kind of intergalactic criminal, but if you're just a guy who wants a drink, you might as well not exist. So it figures that he'd let a walrus-man and this guy who kinda looked like a pig come up to me and start hassling. The piggy was really stuck-up and funny-looking; he went on and on about how he had the death sentence on twelve systems and he was gonna kill me and all that.

He just went at me and pushed me over. I would have pushed him over back, I swear. Sometimes I just drink, but I don't feel drunk. I guess I was drunk then, though, because I fell on the floor

and couldn't get back up. I sure as hell didn't feel like fighting at the moment, and I was just sitting there, blocking the whole goddamn aisle. Thank God good old Bin cut off his arm with a lightsaber. That saved me a whole lot of mess, really it did. Sometimes I hate walrus-men and pig-monsters. I swear.

All of a sudden, we were sitting at a table with this space pilot and a really tall guy, Jewbacca, all covered in hair. I swear to god, you never saw a hairier guy in all your life. He was all right, I guess, but he kept growling like someone was scratching him behind the ear or something. I thought he seemed kinda faggy, but I didn't say anything because he also seemed kinda strong.

This pilot, though, his name was Don Hoho, and was another case altogether. He looked all right, though you could tell he was kind of a mama's boy at heart. His hair was all tousled and all that crap. But you could also tell that he was madly in love with himself. He thought he was the handsomest guy in the Western half of the universe. He *was* pretty handsome too—I'll admit it. But he was the kind of handsome that turns a guy into a big lame movie star. I knew a lot of guys on Tattoooyou who were handsomer than Don Hoho. Or at least not as stuck up.

So he said he wanted ten thousand to fly us to Alderman. I said, that's a lot of money, pal. I mean, whoo-eeee, I had a lot of dough on me, but it went pretty fast. Sometimes I don't even know where all my dough goes. I'm a big spender, I'm telling you. He said, "Who's gonna fly it, kid? You?"

Goddamn. I hate arrogant phonies.

"You bet I could," I said.

Later, we went to the spaceport and Don Hoho showed us his spaceship, the goddamn Post-Millennium Fuck-Up. What a piece of junk! I swear to God. Some people don't know how to pick their spaceships for anything. I read a lot of spaceship magazines, and I've seen some good custom jobs, and this one was strictly for phonies and losers. But Hoho said that he'd made all these goddamn

adjustments himself, for Chrissake! Anyway, we got on board the ship, but these damn Stormdrainers were shooting at us and all that nonsense. I hate laser fights, really I do, but at least none of the people on my side ever die. The big hairy guy was good with a gun, and he kept growling. That phony British android was babbling all over the place. I swear to God, that guy never shuts up. Then we were in the air, and the ship was just clunking along, really slow. I didn't have anything better to do, so I started bothering Hoho.

"Hey," I said. "How old do you think I am?"

"I don't care how old you are, kid!"

"Yeah, well, I'm older than you think! And I can fly this thing! Sure I can!"

"Travelin' through hyperspace ain't like dustin' crops, kid," he said.

What a big jerk! This Hoho was so corny. I hate guys like him.

After I had my breakfast, it was only around noon, and we weren't getting to Alderman till two o'clock, so Bin put a goddamn helmet on my head and told me to stretch out my feelings. What a buncha hooey! Then Bin started holding his head and crying, like. I kept trying to imagine him as a Red-Eye Knight saving the universe, but it was hard to picture. "I felt a great disturbance in the Force," he said, whatever the hell that meant.

So anyway, this stupid ball was flying around and shooting lasers at me. Bin told me to try and hit the lasers with my lightsaber, for Chrissake! I was doing pretty well, actually, pretty terrific, and Bin started singing this song, this old song, and he was singing the hell out of it, too. He had a pretty little voice, and it went, "If a Red-Eye catch a Red-Eye coming through the warp." If any singer's any good, you can always tell, and Bin was pretty good. He was a heluva singer. That song made me feel not so depressed anymore, and I really deflected those lasers, I'm telling you!

Then we got to Alderman, or where Alderman used to be, because now it was just a buncha goddamn rocks floating around in

space or something stupid like that. I had a lousy feeling about the whole situation, if you want to know the truth. This big goddamn space station was coming up on us really fast, and for Chrissake, it caught us up in a stinking *tractor beam*!

After we got sucked into the space station, Don made us hide so Ralph Nader wouldn't find us. I didn't see what the big deal was, though. Anyway, after they searched the ship and all that, I said to Don, "Boy, it's lucky you had these compartments," and I meant it! Then we killed two Stormdrainers and all, and Don and I ended up wearing these goddamn *costumes*. They were really putrid, and they smelled bad. Good old Stormdrainer costumes, though! I looked like I had a ton of muscles. I mean, I was really stacked, and I had a big gun. Then Bin went to look for the tractor beam. I wanted to go with him. It might be hard for you to understand this, but I liked the old guy, really I did. He was the only one who ever talked straight with me. Most people are a bunch of goddamn phonies. But Bin said some crap like my destiny lies on a different path than his, so I had to stay with Don Hoho and that stinky hairy guy.

That little blue android, good old R-P-OO, what a swell android, he stuck his little android wanger into the ship's computer, and found out the goddamn princess was going to be executed, for Chrissake! I figured they couldn't kill her, because she's the only girl who ever really gave me a big boner. Don didn't care about her at all. I had to tell him that she was rich, and that if he rescued her, he'd get a lot of money. I swear that's all some people ever think about. I don't care if Slobba the Butt does have a bounty on your head! Sometimes, there are more important things than money, and anyone who says otherwise is a goddamn phony.

So there I went to rescue Princess Layme, and she was asleep on a slab without a pillow or anything! "Aren't you a little short for a Stormdrainer?" she said. Haw, haw! Good old Layme! "I'm Puke Skybarfer," I said. "I've come to rescue you." You should have seen her. You never saw a princess so pretty and smart in your whole life. She was really smart. I mean, she was an Imperial ambassador and

feisty battle strategist, and she knew her way around a toolbox, too! As a matter of fact, she was smarter than all of us put together, and that's saying something. You ought to have seen old Layme. She had this brown hair that she could braid a thousand different ways. I'm not kidding. She could stick it behind her eyes or it could hang down like a bunch of goddamn snakes or something, and she looked good in a vest, too. She's pretty skinny, like me, but nice skinny. Like riding an air scooter through the forest moon of Ensor skinny. That kind of skinny. You'd like her, I swear. I mean if you gave old Layme the blueprints to an Imperial Star Destroyer, she'd never show them to you if you were a bad guy. She always knows exactly what you're talking about. She's the kind of girl I want to marry someday. In all seriousness.

So then we got caught up in this goddamn firefight, Don and Layme and Jewbacca and me, and there were crummy Storm-drainers to either side. So we shot a hole in the wall to get away from them, and ended up in some goddamn trash compactor. Now, I've lived in space my whole life, and I've been some pretty stinky places, because I'm not afraid of anything and I used to ride my landspeeder all around. But that trash compactor was the stinkiest place I've ever been by far. It just stank and stank, and then it stank some more. I swear to God. Then we heard a goddamn moan. There was definitely something alive in there, I'm telling you. Before I knew it, a big tentacle had wrapped itself around my waist and pulled me under that godforsaken garbage. It was all slimy and hairy and stuff, and it dragged me all around underwater. I was swallowing all this bilge, and I really wanted to throw up, I'm telling you. I started to shiver there under the water and I realized I was going to get pneumonia and die if the thing didn't squeeze me to death. I pictured millions of jerks coming to my funeral and all.

For no good reason, the thing split and I could breathe again, for Chrissake. The walls started closing in and I started screaming to that goddamn phony android to shut off all the trash compactors on the detention level. "Goddamn it to hell, PPO, come in, for Chrissake!" I shouted. It was really squeezing us hard, and we were

going to die in a damn trash compactor. At that moment, I'll admit, I felt awfully sorry for myself, and I promised I'd do something good for the universe if I survived. I really would, if the trash compactor stopped.

We got out OK, or else I wouldn't be writing this, I guess, and then Layme and I got caught at a retractable walkway that didn't move because I'd blasted the controls, but fortunately I had some dental floss in my belt buckle that I'd packed before I left home and all that, so we got across, but the big news is that before we did, she said "good luck," and she kissed me, I swear, and I got a big boner right through my goddamn shorts.

So then we're running for the ship, and Bin is having a lightsaber battle with that crummy Ralph Nader. What a big black phony he is! And Bin just folded up and let Nader slice him open, and then he vanished. I guess I must have really lost it then, because I heard Bin in my head saying, "Run, Puke, run!" I did, but I totally lost it. Later, on the ship, I was crying and all that, because I'm a sensitive guy. Really, I am. I was telling Layme, "I can't believe he's gone," because I couldn't. Good old Bin. He's dead now. You'd have liked him. He was terrifically intelligent and could do things like wave his hand and make people say things that were the opposite of what they meant. He was ironic like that. God, he was a nice guy. What else can you say about someone who taught you to lift objects with your mind? Right after he died, I tried to break all the windows in the Post-Millennium Fuck-Up, but Jewbacca hit me on the head and they gave me a sedative. My head still hurts a little right now, but it's not like I'm trying to write a *novel* or anything like that, for Chrissake.

"It's OK," Layme said to me. "He'd want you to carry on."

I wasn't listening, though. I was thinking about something crazy. "You know what the goddamn hell I'd like to be," I said, "for Chrissake, if I had my motherfucking choice?"

"What?" Layme said. "Stop *swearing*."

"You know that song 'If a Red-Eye catch a Red-Eye comin' through the warp?' I'd like—"

"It's 'If a Red-Eye *meet* a Red-Eye coming through the warp!' old Layme said. "It's a poem. By Boba *Burns*."

"I *know* it's a poem by Boba Burns," I said. "I thought it was 'if a Red-Eye catch a Red-Eye.' Anyway, I keep picturing all these Red-Eyes running around and pretending to fight each other in this magical swamp and all. Thousands of Red-Eyes from around the universe, and nobody's around to watch them, except me. And I'm standing on the edge of some crazy cave. What I have to do, I have to catch all the Red-Eyes when they want to come into that cave and face their darkest fears. I mean, I have to *catch* them before they fall. That's all I'd do all day. I'd be the catcher in the Red-Eye and all. I know it's crazy, but that's the only thing I'd like to be."

Old Layme didn't say anything for a long time. Then, when she said something, all she said was, "Puke, don't be a goddamn pussy."

That's all I'm going to tell about. I could probably tell you how we met up with the rebel fleet and how Layme kissed me on the cheek and I flew my starfighter into the Breath Star and heard Bin telling me to use the goddamn Farce and trust my feelings. About how I turned off my computer and let the Farce guide me and blew up the whole space station by myself, and how when it blew up, I swear I had an orgasm right there in my spacesuit and Bin said to me that the Farce would be with me always. But I don't feel like it. Really I don't. That stuff doesn't interest me too much right now.

I mean, it's all a bunch of baloney, if you think about it too hard. Me and Don Hoho and Jewbacca parading in front of all these people and Layme with her phony hairstyle smiling at us like she rules the universe benignly or some such crap. When I think about it, I wish I'd just stayed at home and had never gotten involved. Who needs to grow up, anyway? All for a lousy *medal*, for Chrissake!



A NIGHT OUT AT THE MEMEPLEX

ARION BERGER

Any dictator can tell you that the most effective way to control the masses is through the selective withholding of information. By 1999, George Lucas had perfected his impersonation of a strutting, banana-republic tyrant. His partial-unveiling techniques kept the public salivating for tidbits from *Star Wars: Episode I: The Phantom Menace* as they were rolled out under silver domes—the first trailer, the second trailer, the toys, the tickets.

Not only did Lucas control the accessibility of the film and film-related goodies, but he orchestrated a mouthy information campaign worthy of Gabriele D'Annunzio. Whipping the masses to a froth of righteousness, Lucas stated repeatedly in interviews that he expected snotty critics to greet his latest *SW* venture with the same Luke-warmth with which they had met the first three. That stance was a giveaway that it wasn't just greed, but reflexive ass-covering that motivated Lucas—his manufactured and spurious outsider positioning meant that anyone who subsequently rendered a verdict that didn't collaborate with Lucas's self-generated sense of importance would be proving himself a knee-jerk antifun jaded elitist insider. The idea was to paint any objectors, rather than his lathered public, as brainwashed ghouls.

In the end, it wasn't the critics or even the fanboys who decided that *The Phantom Menace* came up way short; it was the second tier of fans and the interested public. But in the year or so leading up to the film's release, the hype juggernaut rolled on unabated and virtually unquestioned. Fanboys and get-a-lifers rabid to stand in line—not for the film, but for tickets for the film, for toys related to the film, for the soundtrack to the film, and for the book (one book sold under cash-generating multiple covers) of the film—weren't left with any reflection on why these pursuits (and expenses) might be a good idea. Even the interested public's explanation is about the *stuff* about the thing, the thing itself being practically nonexistent, or at least irrelevant. "It's *Star Wars*, man!" was not only an acceptable response, it was the only possible response.

That's why the reviews wouldn't matter, and Lucas knew it—responding to his movie meant responding to his careful positioning.

Not long ago naysayers and naked-emperor-spotters would have wondered if everyone else was "brainwashed," a marvelous old-fashioned word. In fact, Lucas's demand that we all participate in his vision of himself and his work, that all citizens should want to see it, that its levels of quality, coherence, and entertainment value should be of no significance, did take the shape of what Charles McKay defined in his excellent 1841 book called *Extraordinary Popular Delusions and the Madness of Crowds*. (Where's the band called Tulipmania, is what I want to know?) But as irksome as it may have been to people who wanted to actually see the movie before falling in love with it, there are harmless possible factors that can account for this.

For one thing, it's fun to participate in some cultural swoon. People need community, thrive on finding or establishing common interests, and thrill to novelty. Ask anyone who stood in line the night of July 8, 2000, waiting to pick up their preordered copies of the fourth Harry Potter book. While the kids busied themselves swirling their capes, the grown-ups—and most of them, us, were grown-ups—traded the handout stickers and swapped genial

moanings along the lines of “what are we doing up this late?” before scurrying home with our two or three copies of *The Goblet of Fire*.

Then again, no one has to be brainwashed into having a good time by hopping on a crowded train. In elitist terms—and counter-culturists are always elitists; that’s the only way they can keep their numbers satisfyingly small—believing the hype is the ultimate gullibility. But the distinction between cultish and popular has been all but obliterated as the culture flattens out and information is disseminated at a lightning pace to a generally far more savvy populace than that of even fifteen years ago. To align oneself with a subculture is to be part of a widespread movement; nothing happens in the dark of a counterculture anymore. Conversely, joining in a popular wave is a subcultural identification in itself. The structure of taste has shifted from a geologic one—strata of varying widths, with the widest nearest the surface—to a columnar model, with bars of special interests side by side, of approximately equal height.

So when postmodernism proper first washed over U.S. shores on a wave of French theory and snarky Lettermanisms, it identified itself popularly as subsets of references. These references identified the elite audience that it addressed as one conversant with a whole shadow realm of texts and entertainments, which in turn reflected a system of values, beliefs, and standards cherished by the audience and the postmodernist, thus titillating it. The more obscure the reference, the more vigorous a mix of high and low, the more elite the presumed audience.

If God was dead for these appropriative filchers, Hegel wasn’t, and neither was Ronald Reagan. Trickle-down culture fed a wider and more middlebrow range of references to the bulky midstratum (Ginger or Mary Ann, anyone?), and antithesis made appropriation the standard by which a piece of art defined itself. I used to joke that the film business had become such a red-meat purveyor that the inevitable next step was a *Star Wars* film that consisted of nothing but a super-digitally-enhanced cantina scene. Soon enough, that joke wasn’t funny anymore. Films like *Shrek* turned Lucas’s

meta-marketing strategy into creative empiricism: a film that is only marginally the thing itself (in *Shrek's* case, a fairy tale) but depends largely for its definition as that-thingness on a desultory barrage of that-thing-derived references. Without reflecting a set of values, beliefs, or judgments; without exposing inconsistencies, ironies, or hypocrisies; without taking a satirical or parodic stance; a series of random swats in the direction of already monumentally popular jokes, riffs, and entertainments, is just that—"attitude" without the attitude.

Star Wars itself is partially responsible for this vertical shift, and in part a victim of it. It was one of the first movies to become simultaneously a cult artifact and a staggeringly popular phenomenon. It also inaugurated a new way of looking at films—that is, repeatedly. Children who have grown up with the commonplace of video take for granted the practice of watching a movie over and over, or treating it like wallpaper. Not long before, revival houses and art houses existed to keep old films in circulation. As for mainstream or foreign contemporary films, the audience had no access to them once their theater run closed. In 1977, kids returned to the theater in droves, keeping *Star Wars* on the screen for unprecedented runs and whipping up waves of renewed enthusiasm. Repeated viewings were the cult behavior of a huge audience. For all of *Star Wars'* hoary adventure-serial precedent, simplistic message and wha-hoo thrills, it functioned like a specialist taste.

The *Star Wars* cult is a crossover success of massive proportions, but the idea of an internal machine generating fodder for fans is not new, particularly in science fiction. *Star Trek* fleshed out the TV expediencies of its universe with back stories and extraterrestrial trivia (look, kids, a Klingon-language dictionary!) to sate its insiders; prerelease *Phantom Menace* and *Attack of the Clones* web sites fill in the series' plot holes and speculate on the connecting threads among the films, as if it is all meant to make sense. Unlike the appeal of other areas of commerce, in which artificially limited supply generates value—Beanie Babies and other self-appointed collectibles—the mystique of *Star Wars* isn't economic but psycho-

logical: How close can the consumer get to the coveted object? After late-'90s audiences were hardened into skepticism by the psych-out gag trailers for—to cite just a few examples—the *South Park* movie, Howard Stern's *Private Parts*, and *The Spy Who Shagged Me*—they were honored with a peek at the real thing, when *The Phantom Menace* trailer opened wide, and they were hard-pressed not to somehow feel lucky.

The old objection to being helplessly ground under the wheels of hype in service of (what turned out to be) such an unimaginative rip-off would be that the Empire has no clothes, but there is a school of thought that would argue that it's more pernicious even than our old friend the washed brain. Said school consists of Memetic theorists; they posit the existence of a "meme," a unit of cultural inheritance that replicates itself, brain to brain, the way genes replicate from body to body down generations. Although the theory has been scoffed at by those in the scientific establishment who hold that the human being is the apotheosis of biological organization (Stephen Jay Gould and Jonathan Miller, for example), meme-theory popularists like Richard Dawkins and the University of London's Susan Blackmore see it as a viable explanation for our continuing cultural evolution, such as it is.

Memes can be "good ideas, good tunes, good poems, or driveling mantras"—paging Bobby McFerrin—"... spread by imitation as genes spread by bodily reproduction or viral infection," Dawkins writes in *Unweaving the Rainbow: Science, Delusion, and the Appetite for Wonder*. "[T]he conspiracy-theory meme has a built-in response to the objection that there is no good evidence for the conspiracy: Of course not, that's how powerful the conspiracy is." He goes on to say, "Just as a species' gene pool becomes a cooperative cartel of genes, so a group of minds—a 'culture,' a 'tradition'—becomes a cooperative cartel of memes, a memeplex, it has been called." Again, as with genes, the conditions must be in place for the transferring of memes to happen. Dawkins cites conspiracy theory because we are familiar with the environment in which it arose—a post-industrial society, an increasingly politically skeptical populace, a

distrust of power, and previous solid evidence of conspiratorial misdeeds. But the meme, if it exists, also infected northern Europe's tulip freaks, and makes a very nice case for the Victorian mania for spiritualism that morphed into the New Age foolishness we still live with.

In crude terms, what has made judgment impossible for those relatively uninfected by the meme is the hype, although hype isn't quite the concept in this case. Hype pumps up interest in a venture (usually an entertainment venture) with mass accessibility as the goal. Lucas, on the other hand, controls accessibility as a way of manufacturing interest, among not just the moviegoing public but the toy-buying, burger-eating, Internet-cruising, dinner party-chatting, Western civilization-existing public. His horizontal integration is perfectly suited for modern conditions, the flattened landscape.

When the hype—the mass cultural participation—reaches this level, movies are no longer entertainment. Dawkins argues that while genes build instruments like bodies—an elephant, say—memes manipulate existing bodies. Genes have no purpose in absence of their goal. We are almost at the point, however, that memes do. As units of information, they can exist as satellites without a central planet—that is, the elephant doesn't need to exist for us to harbor a wealth of elephant information. *Shrek's* fairy tale DNA is in evidence in every frame of a film that was not actually a fairy tale, and Lucas, naively, expected that *The Phantom Menace* could pass for an elephant by displaying a holographic series of units of *Star Wars* information.

Movies never were solely entertainment delivery systems; it's useful and necessary for a culture, or many subcultures, to descry meaning and importance in entertainment products, but the fulcrum of the products' existence used to be their role as pleasures. With that core purpose removed, there's nothing left but a galaxy of merchandise, fictional lore, ticket-scrambling, and reportage of the above that revolves mindlessly around a great black hole.

All the publications that participated with varying degrees of

gullibility take, by now reflexively, postmodern attitudes to the subject—the more skeptical, the more they can pose as critics of the hype while fueling it. *Newsweek's* cover story on "The Selling of *Star Wars*" related in grotesque detail how Lucas and his flying monkeys controlled public interest and retail methods on the way to *Phantom Menace's* release, but signed off by noting that if "Phantomania has gotten out of hand," *Newsweek* is as culpable as anyone—nudge nudge, wink wink. (They then revved up the machine for the release of the subsequent bomb *Pearl Harbor*.) It was a clever and meaningless escape route to pseudo-news respectability, exposing the entire enterprise as a way of striking a critical pose without genuine critical content.

The trouble with meme theory is, ironically, also the trouble with the *Star Wars* phenomenon—neither makes enough sense when observed too closely, and neither considers the quirks and idiosyncrasies of the audience it seeks to account for. Nor does meme theory, specifically, cover the question of why many audience members remain psychologically unevolved. Sometimes people like stuff because they like it, and sometimes an accidental or purposeful collusion of media, cash-hungry string pullers, and the cultural climate results in what looks like mass hypnotism to the immune observer. It would be nice if there were a Darwinian basis for our occasional inexplicable swoons, because it would provide a rationale for the random, disorderly tastes of the public. (Not unlike the way conspiracy theory accounts for the random, disorderly behavior of those in power; it stems from a deep need for order and reason and, in the absence of these, it attributes motive.) But the theory, like the *Phantom* frenzy, lays a heavy hand on one's decision-making faculties: You have no choice but to buy it. You've been brainwashed. Lucas can chalk up all the grouching to *Star Wars* backlash if he wants, but he doesn't understand that even in his world of Manichaeian destiny and chosen ones, a little free will would go a long way.



MARRIED TO THE FORCE

KEVIN SMITH

A brother just can't escape being a *Star Wars* dork sometimes.

It was at the Cannes Film Festival in 1994 that I first realized this, and took note of just how much resonance the long-dormant *Star Wars* phenomenon still had in my life.

Return of the Jedi had come out eons prior, in 1983, and the saga had seemed to breathe its last when the made-for-television movie *The Ewok Adventure* and the subsequent *Ewoks* and *Droids* cartoons had hit the air in the late '80s/early '90s. George Lucas, once the mythology-builder and mastermind behind the series of movies that preoccupied so much of my youth, was nowhere to be seen anymore—with the exception of his periodic forays back into producing, on films like *Tucker* and *Radioland Murders*. That he'd gone from envisioning Tusken Raiders riding proudly atop Banthas to creating THX and the Avid editing system forefather, the Edit-Droid, seemed to make sense. Set for life, thanks to the brilliant stroke of foresight in securing the licensing rights to the trilogy, Lucas could kick back and spend the rest of his days dreaming up and developing new advances in the technology of filmmaking that future filmmakers and the next generation of myth builders could benefit from.

So I'm sitting down with a French journalist to talk about my debut film, *Clerks*. We'd already been to Sundance at this point, where Miramax had acquired the picture for worldwide distribution, and the early reviews of our shitty-looking amateur-hour effort were head-scratchingly positive in the states. This, however, was Europe, the cradle of culture, and we were at Cannes, the most well known film festival in the universe. Surely, the film aesthetes in attendance here would see through our overpraised dick-and-fart joke picture and declare that this emperor had no clothes. And the very French journo I was sitting across from, who wore the expression of someone who'd have much rather been interviewing Bruce Willis for his palooka turn in the festival's unequivocal hit of that year, *Pulp Fiction*, seemed as though he was prepared to charge me as a charlatan and spend the next few minutes lecturing me on the visual language of film and dressing me down in Franglais for shitting all over that language with the potty-mouthed antics of our convenience-store confection.

After staring at me for a long beat, this is what he said:

"The foul-mouth boy an' ze fat man outside ze shop . . . are zey the Artoo De-too an' See-Threepio of zis strange universe you 'ave created?"

I slowly, cautiously opened my eyes, which had been grimaced-wincing closed in preparation for the barrage of French vulgarities I assumed I was about to be on the receiving end of, and offered the now-smiling cancaner a puzzled, yet relieved look.

"I hadn't . . . really thought of them as such," I said, though it was probably far less well worded at the time. "But . . . I guess they could be construed as Artoo and Threepio, yeah."

"No one has said zis to you yet?" he inquired, kinda pleased with himself.

"No one who's not a friend has talked to me about *Star Wars* since 1983," I volunteered.

And thus began the start of a half hour conversation with this very excited boulangerie regular not just about the parallels between *Clerks* and *Star Wars*, but about how great the *Star Wars* saga was in general, including our favorite moments and characters,

and how we both wished Lucas would get off his ass and make the then-remaining six episodes.

Years later, *Star Wars* would assault the public consciousness again in a big, big way, but back in '94 it was a rare delight to hear someone throw those two terms together in reference to the movies I grew up on. In '94, the rerelease of the Holy Trilogy was but a glint in Lucas's eye, not to mention the unveiling to the world of Jar Jar Binks. In '94, it felt like *I* was the only one talking about *Star Wars* anymore.

And talk about it I would—for the next four movies we'd make, a de rigueur *Star Wars* conversational dissection or homage became one of the leitmotifs of View Askew's body of work.

From that first discussion in *Clerks* on the topic of whether or not those hired to build the second Death Star were innocent casualties of war or justly slaughtered coconspirators in the Rebel attack on the work-in-progress space station in *Return of the Jedi*, to how hell-bent Silent Bob was to move a cigarette with only the power of his would-be Jedi mind in *Mallrats*; from Hooper's assertion in *Chasing Amy* that the revelation of a crusty, old, white Anakin Skywalker under the powerful black helmet (and voice) of Darth Vader was a cloying, racist message, to a full-blown Bong-saber duel in *Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back*, the *Star Wars* saga has been as much a part of our films as the wall-to-wall pseudo-intellectual potty talk.

But while every nod to the Trilogy *became* a device we'd incorporate to pander to a Gen X audience as nostalgic as we were for the days when Vader was much more than just a shill for Energizer batteries (a great commercial, but c'mon . . .), it didn't *start out* as that. The origins of the *Star Wars* riffs in our flicks were not born out of demographic data or studio-mandated attempts at hipness; they were born out of a childhood love affair with three movies that were the cinematic equivalent of a prepubescent first marriage.

I was married to *Star Wars* when I was a kid. I had all the toys, wallpapered my bedroom with the posters and images cut out of

magazines, action figure card-backs, and Burger King giveaways. Every Christmas and birthday from 1977 to 1983, I was the easiest person in the world to shop for. John Williams's scores were the soundtracks of my youth, before pop and rap would edge them out, and Carrie Fisher was my one true love . . . even though she was the bride of Paul Simon.

And whether I wanted it to or not, *Star Wars* influenced—and sometimes *defined*—important epochs of my life, teaching me how to conduct myself in a galaxy not very far away at all.

It's June of 1977, and I'm in second grade at Our Lady of Perpetual Help, the Catholic School of my youth. John Kovic brings in the Kenner *Star Wars* Early Bird Set, a collection of five action figures that would spawn a merchandising empire. The set, comprising Luke Skywalker, Artoo Detoo, Ben Kenobi, Darth Vader, and a Jawa, is the envy of all in class—even me, who has not yet even seen *Star Wars* at this point. I go home and immediately beg my parents to send away for the Early Bird Set, as it was a mail-order-only promotion, and then take me to see the movie that spawned the toys.

I got half of what I wanted. My parents took me to see *Star Wars*, but money being tight in our family, I never did get an Early Bird Set of my own. Seeing how crushed I was by this, my parents endeavored, over the course of the next six years, to provide me with all the essential *Star Wars* figures, play sets, and vehicles. And it was through these purchases that my parents taught me to respect the value of things—because shelling out \$1.99 for each figure wasn't easy for our tightly budgeted family to manage. My parents insisted that if they were going to pay for such extravagances, I would have to treat my toys with care. So unlike everyone else I knew, I never took my little guys, gals, and aliens out into the yard to reenact the films; there were no sandy driveways doubling for Tatooine, no snowy curbsides standing in for Hoth. All the settings for the adventures I'd create were crafted around the furniture and crevices found on the floors of the kitchen, the enclosed front porch, or my bedroom.

Because of this care for my *Star Wars* toys, I would eventually amass a collection of figures that would become legendary among my peers, as I was the only kid in O.L.P.H. who could claim he had all the tiny guns and lightsabers the action figures were packaged with—even Han Solo’s blaster, which was notorious for being the easiest to lose. And later in life, when adolescent boredom got the best of other fly-by-night fans and they started blowing up their figures with Cherry Bombs and M-80s, my collection could always be found safely tucked under my bed, in a pair of Darth Vader-head carrying cases (today, they reside in a closet in my house).

It was that penchant for keeping things in good condition and never throwing anything out that would eventually lead to Jay and Silent Bob’s Secret Stash, our comic book store in Red Bank, New Jersey. Having kept props and costumes from even our first film in safe, guarded condition, the Secret Stash went from being a simple comic book store to a View Askew museum of sorts, with artifacts from all our films decorating the walls and glass cases. Anything that doesn’t find a home in the store gets sold off at our web site’s auction page, dubbed “EJay,” and usually fetches a pretty amazing price for what most would’ve left for garbage. Had I not been instructed, via my *Star Wars* figures, to treat my belongings with care, neither the store nor “EJay” would be possible.

But perhaps the biggest crossover from the *Star Wars* galaxy to mine would have to be the year we mixed *Dogma* at Skywalker Ranch. Known to house only the premier sound-mixing facilities and best talent in the industry, we were flabbergasted when our faux-blasphemous flick secured a stage and a bona fide Skywalker Sound mix. While there, *Episode I* (and later, *Episode II*) producer Rick McCallum even popped by one of our sessions and invited me to watch the as-yet-unreleased trailer for *The Phantom Menace*, as its mix had just been finished and they were going to screen it in the big theater. And remember, this is during a period when people were lining up months in advance to see *Star Wars* on opening weekend, so there was none of this “Lucas sold out!” or

"Fuck Jar Jar!" backlash. Getting an early glimpse at that trailer was a die-hard fan's dream come true.

I, however, could no longer be considered a die-hard fan. While I still had mountains of respect for what Lucas had created, and enough affection for what I felt were just some old movies that meant a lot to me growing up to keep referencing them in the movies I now found myself making, I'd long since gotten divorced from my childhood marriage to *Star Wars*.

Ironically, though, *Star Wars* would figure prominently in my next marriage—this one to a flesh-and-blood partner.

Jennifer and I had met when she interviewed me for *USA Today*. Our courtship and whirlwind romance were cut short by what can only be described as an apparently very healthy sperm count on my behalf. While deep in postproduction on *Dogma*, Jen got pregnant—which was no big deal, as we'd already fallen in love and were musing about marriage. However, getting around to tying the knot prior to the arrival of our first kid was proving extremely difficult, as the demands of *Dogma* made for a very hectic year. I'd secured a big fuck-off ring from Tiffany and proposed to Jen, but we couldn't really find a date to do the deed that wasn't already occupied by some stage of postproduction.

So we're up at Skywalker, in the midst of our mix, and Jen is about seven to eight months pregnant. While I was on the mixing stage all day, she was either resting in the sumptuous lodgings at the Ranch-run inn, or walking the grounds, taking in the beauty of what is truly God's country. And on one particular evening, when I'd come back to the room after mixing, she said:

"It's really so beautiful up here. This would be a nice place to get married."

"Yeah," I said. Because, y'know—she was right.

"Would you want to?" she asked.

"Get married? Of course."

"Up here."

"Sure. I mean, I don't know if they allow for that here, but if they did, it'd be a better place than most to do it."

"It would, wouldn't it?"

And as I sat there on a bed in a room of the Skywalker Ranch Inn (that might've even been partly financed by the money my parents blew on all that *Star Wars* paraphernalia eons ago), gazing at my very patient and even more pregnant girlfriend, a person I didn't even know existed back when I was just a *Star Wars*-obsessed youth, I was moved by what I can only assume was . . . well, *the Force*. Because the next thing that came out of my mouth was:

"Let's do it this weekend."

So, on April 25, 1999, I did what most hard-core fans of *Star Wars* only dream of doing, and got married at Skywalker Ranch.

Lest you think I'm a total *Star Wars* dork in denial, though, I'd like to point out for the record that I finally extricated myself from the stranglehold *Star Wars* seemed to have on my life by *not* naming our kid Leia or Boba, tempting as that might have been. I mean, sooner or later, you've gotta grow up, right? So we named our daughter Harley Quinn.

After a *Batman* villainess.



WORKS EVERY TIME

ELVIS MITCHELL

When *The Empire Strikes Back* was rereleased in its Special Edition in 1997, Lando Calrissian's first line to Princess Leia, "What have we here?"—delivered with a cooled-out, I'll-see-you-in-my-room-for-a-Romulan-Rum-and-Coke assurance—got the same reaction as the piece of dialogue received during the picture's initial release in 1980: the standing ovation due the first interstellar Mack ever spotted on-screen. And Billy Dee Williams's ridiculously suave rogue-trader is given a lavish entrance, striding across the screen in his full swerve-on, 47-degree-angle walk, trailed by a cape and an entourage; all that was missing was James Brown's manager snatching the cloak off Lando's shoulders and proclaiming the brother The Hardest Working Man in Space Business. Revisiting Lando in this context brought to mind the sepia-remake-of-*Casablanca* sketch from *In Living Color*, in which Keenen Ivory Wayans broke out his Williams impression—the heavy-lidded you-belong-to-me stare, the lazy magnetism and liquid seductiveness of Williams's speaking rhythms—and Jimmy-jammed Billy Dee into the Humphrey Bogart role. A canny piece of comedy, because for filmgoers of a certain generation and disposition, Williams presented that potential, and

when the *Color* sketch ran in 1990, Williams's suave *vecito* was being employed to extol the virtues of Colt 45 Malt Liquor, a mighty-mighty comedown. (This wasn't the first time Williams's silken machismo had been parodied. In the 1972 TV movie *Truman Capote's The Glass House*—a prison drama that could have been a necessarily milder precursor of HBO's *Oz*—white-trash fellow inmate Vic Morrow mocked Williams's predatory amble—but Morrow also kept his distance.) Williams's fox-slaying addition to the *Star Wars* mythos—besides making one wonder if Lando kept Teddy Pendergrass's "Turn Out the Lights" going on the *Millennium Falcon's* in-dash eight-track player—went a long way towards removing the bad taste that *Star Wars* left in the mouths of African-American filmgoers in 1977. It was hard to ignore the presence of the lone Brother from Another Planet in the first picture—because he was an extra who turned up twice. The unmistakable signifier of intergalactic racism—the hardworking extra's dashing from one set to another—brought to mind the joke that both Arsenio Hall and Godfrey Cambridge spun variations on: a black astronaut choking on the phrases "Yes, NASA" and "No, NASA." And the bullying vigor of James Earl Jones's vocal presence—recognizable instantly to a black audience—giving a malevolent elegance to Darth Vader, begged another question. Although, to be frank, given that Vader was about the coolest thing going in the first *Star Wars*, it made the possibility that he was black perfectly acceptable. (And when it turned out he was Luke's father it was cooler still—I only wish there had been chat rooms back in that day so I could have scanned all of the cyberspace clamor such a revelation provoked—at least until the movie itself had been widely enough seen that everyone knew it wasn't Jones's head beneath the helmet.)

Williams's addition to the cast of *Empire* showed an admirable sensitivity on Lucas's part, an empathy that few filmmakers would've displayed. In his Lucas biography, *Skywalking*, Dale Pollock details the early casting sessions for the first *Star Wars* film and mentions the two other actors up for the role of Han Solo:

Christopher Walken, whose "audition" from the lost "Screen Tests" was the subject of one of the best *Saturday Night Live* sketches ever (Kevin Spacey expertly parroting Walken's spooked, oblivious vocal rhythms), and Glynn Turman. Turman is probably best known as the ROTC commander on the instantly forgettable *Cosby Show* spin-off, *A Different World*. But he cut an impressive swath through the blaxploitation era, starring in the wily, straight-up ghetto comedy *Cooley High* (which ended up getting a small-screen conversion into the pop-locking sitcom *What's Happening?*). Turman was revered by hard-core black action fans for the lead role in the black, exorcist drama *J. D.'s Revenge*, in which he played a decent young dude possessed by the spirit of an O.G. determined to stick it to the Man even from the Grave.

Lucas passed on Walken because . . . well, it's easy to see why; the movie was going to be spacy enough as it was. The rationale behind his refusal to use Turman is, unfortunately, easier to understand than the elimination of Walken. Knowing—if he ever got to make his planned sequels—that a romance for Han and Leia was planned, Lucas didn't want the controversial, and probably non-commercial, element of an interracial relationship, a love that in the mid-'70s still barely dared to speak its name. "I didn't want to make *Guess Who's Coming to Dinner?* at that point, so I sort of backed off," Lucas told Pollock. To compensate for his moment of cowardice and the complaints of racism lodged against the first *Star Wars*—a benign racism that was part of a continuous and hilarious tradition to some black movie fans and slap in the face to others—Lucas conjured up the sleek Calrissian and contoured him to Williams's contours. According to *Skywalking*, "George conceived Lando as 'a suave, dashing black man in his thirties,'" and Williams, whom Lucas had been impressed by in *Lady Sings the Blues*, was Lucas's man from the outset.

What's important to remember is that Williams by that point had done his time in blaxploitation film, too, and with the exception of *Lady*—where the camera lingers over his Louis McKay, the chocolate-drenched piece of wish fulfillment, so that all of the

young black women in the audience were given ample time to swoon—opportunities were scarce. The 1971 TV movie *Brian's Song* put Williams on the map, though it was just another way station in costar James Caan's trajectory. Caan's career took off shortly thereafter with *The Godfather*, and it had to be abundantly clear to Williams how few chances black actors get for leading roles. He knew there'd be no *Godfather* in his future, and in those days, crossover was something that Kool and the Gang and Barry White had more of a chance to exploit than he would.

His sculpted, male beauty and leading-man presence lashed to polished acting skills probably got in the way after a while; he would have been as out of place kicking down doors in a pair of leather pants alongside of Jim Brown and Fred Williamson as Harrison Ford would. The country-boy slyness of his performance as Gale Sayers in *Brian's Song* showed what he could do when given the material, and Motown honcho Berry Gordy—who put the actor in *Lady Sings the Blues*, which he produced as a vehicle for Diana Ross—labored to make a place for Williams in the movies. *Hit!*, a revenge picture in which Williams plays a Fed determined to bring down a drug cartel after his daughter dies of a smack overdose, was originally to star Steve McQueen, and Gordy grabbed the script for his Dark Gable. Gordy reunited Williams with several of his *Lady* collaborators, like director Sidney J. Furie and Richard Pryor. *Skywalking* details Williams's dawning ambivalence as he approaches Lando, reluctant because he didn't want an affirmative-action role. Eventually, he came to believe that the part could have been played by anyone.

Williams was wrong, though—no one else could've inhabited the part, not as he did. The actor's velveteen pride—smooth to the touch, but raging beneath the skin nonetheless—informed the turn. More than anything, Williams's underplayed relish—the pleasure he can radiate—give his scenes in *The Empire Strikes Back* the feel that they're in a movie for grown-ups, much like the brief scenes highlighting Alec Guinness's bespoke authority do. It's true, Lando is kind of a roué cliché, but Williams dances through his

lines—he's never been an actor to rush a speech. When he's on-screen, the material doesn't seem carved from Smithfield ham; well, not so *obviously* carved from Smithfield ham, anyway. As Han and Leia fly out of the blocks in an attitude-laced sprint, Williams's blissful cool—part of his charm—adds to the enjoyment; his Chilly Willy Player's contrast to Harrison Ford's revved-up Solo gives Han something to do. Solo is no longer just grinding out third-rate banter with Leia. He's suspicious, and slightly envious, of Lando.

To some extent, Williams was right about Lando's token possibilities, as no one ever believed he had a Stormtrooper's chance with Leia. And such a romance would've been a huge turnoff to the black audience. The enthralled black female segment would never have forgiven him for depriving them of a fantasy held since he smoothed out his pinstriped lapels in *Lady*. And Lucas knew that having Lando spend too much time sniffing around Leia—given the presexual atmosphere of the films—would have raised too many questions. A lot of the fun, though, comes from what can only be described as Williams's worldly-anachronistic quality. Just who was hooking up Lando's perm in outer space, anyway? Williams's appearance became part of a compact with African-American audiences, a conspiratorial smirk with the black actors who don't really make sense in certain on-screen situations. Lucas's comprehension of balance had to inspire actors like the young Samuel L. Jackson. Jackson was in school in Atlanta at Morehouse College at the time of *Empire's* release, and for him to witness not just some pleasant but anonymous performer, but an actor with Billy Dee Williams's iconic cool being employed to do what he does and not just function as well-meaning wallpaper (he was far too Mack-tastic to be consigned to such a place) must have been a trip. And the circle went unbroken when Jackson became a part of the *Star Wars* mythos himself, representing a presence as potent in its ramifications as Lando Calrissian offered in 1980. Williams is an undeniably stylized presence in the movies; he's larger than life, which means that he's not overwhelmed by the grandiosity that Lucas constructed. A lesser figure might have been daunted, if not

consumed, in the Worlds Beyond tableaux. Williams's ease speaks for itself; it must've been responsible for a whole suburban-warrior class of young would-be Landos of all races, training to ply their bravado on the cuties sitting in front of them in homeroom.

Williams fell victim to his own carefully maintained stylization, though—the underslung glissandos of urbanity didn't give him much room to operate; he was not considered to be an actor with much range outside of the urban sophistication that became his bailiwick the first time he marcelled his hair. Once he went Mack, he could never go back. The same closed system mired Richard Roundtree and Ron O'Neal, actors who showed promise beyond the circumscribed worlds of *Shaft* and *Superfly*. Since black actors of the period were allowed so few chances, Williams couldn't even use his role in *Empire* to knock down a few walls and fashion a future for himself within that rather limited purview of the sci-fi genre. A year after *Empire*, he was running two steps behind Sylvester Stallone, as the terse sidekick in the worthless cop drama *Nighthawks*.

The swell of pride in theaters when Lando sidled onto the screen—I can testify to the reaction in Detroit when *Empire* first played—caused an attendant ripple of applause, the quieter version of a shout-out. By placing Williams in the picture, Lucas guaranteed that black audiences would connect with the *Star Wars* galaxy in a way that they never had with fantasy and science fiction before. But his inclusiveness seems to have been lost on productions that have come in the *Star Wars* films' wake. Most distressingly, the lesson that Lucas put into practice by creating Lando has been at least partially negated, Samuel L. Jackson or no Samuel L. Jackson, by the Jar Jar Binks controversy—that name even sounds like it belongs on the Mantan Moreland of space, and his comportment did as much for intergalactic brothers as *Homeboys from Outer Space*.

In the fantasy world, it looked like Williams would get up to the plate one more time. His peerless urbanity loomed large in 1989's *Batman*, where he played the crusader who didn't wear a cape:

District Attorney Harvey Dent. Flashing that razor-sharp smile gleaming with promise, Williams hung back, and those of us aware of the Batman undercurrent figured that it meant there was more to come for him—and director Tim Burton planted that seed. In the comics, Harvey Dent has acid flung in his face by an angry victim of the prosecutor's talent; Dent marshals the remains of his scarred psyche and deteriorates into the conflicted villain Two-Face, one of the few bad Batman nemeses who didn't seem like a pathetic mental patient in a Halloween costume, as in, well . . . the Riddler, the Penguin, Mr. Freeze . . . all of the other Batman foes besides the Joker. In the comics, Two-Face had the damaged backstory of a character out of a particularly malignant film noir: he was the Janus of thugs, with his godlike handsomeness on one side of his face, and a dense, repellent mass of scar tissue on the other, so crazy he was reduced to flipping a coin—one side scratched with a knife—to decide his actions. And Williams, with his glowing good looks, was a logical choice—after all, wouldn't any guy go goofy after being deprived of that particular brand of matinee-idol patina? A patina that, incidentally, Time the Avenger had done a poor job of diminishing. By 1989, the fifty-two-year-old Williams still looked robust and well-preserved. And his potential Two-Face triumph seemed prefigured in another way; in *Nighthawks* his face gets slashed and he spends the last third of the picture with a gauze bandage covering his stalwart jawline.

Williams's Dent was nowhere to be seen in the 1992 sequel *Batman Returns*, though the picture barely bothered to make any time for the title character, either; it could've been called *Batman Returns for About Twenty Minutes*. His—Williams's, I mean—excision was a bad sign, since the regulars from the previous *Batman* movie all got screen time except for Dent and Vicki Vale. Vicki's absence could be explained by the fact that no one had any idea what to do with the character once Bruce Wayne revealed his secret identity to her. Williams's absence from *Batman Returns* was part of an odd summer for African-Americans. That same season, one critic noted that in the Eddie Murphy romantic comedy

Boomerang, no white characters were in the picture. The same writer didn't point out that few speaking roles for African-Americans existed in *Batman Returns*, a movie set in Gotham City, provisionally a fictional version of Manhattan. By the time Two-Face was added to a Batman movie—*Batman Forever*—Harvey Dent had been recast. He was now played by Tommy Lee Jones, who already looked like he hadn't quite got out of the way of a vial of acid flung in his direction. (You almost wondered if director Joel Schumacher wouldn't have wanted to supervise the *unharmed* side of Two-Face's visage with makeup prosthetics and CGI.) Few mentioned that Williams had gotten the bum's rush, since more attention was focused on new Batman Val Kilmer (stepping in for Michael Keaton) and his brand-new PG-13 costume—with its amply rounded booty compartment and anatomically correct nipples, the suit looked like it had been made in a West Village shop for the lamest of rough trade. As for Jones, he had become a part of the Warner Brothers stable—he single-handedly rescued the studio's Steven Seagal programmer *Under Siege*, and rode *The Fugitive* into a Best Supporting Actor Oscar win. Obviously, giving the Two-Face role to Jones was Warner's idea of loyalty. Yet, Lucas proved how cheap loyalty comes in the firmament of the American cinema. He made his stand to eschew the inertia that functions as racism in the movie-studio world and, with Williams, pursue a casting choice that both sent a signal and united audiences. By welcoming a black character into a series of films that would forever alter the way the world viewed fantasy, Lucas's generosity and shrewdness showed that a bigger worldview doesn't have to be an afterthought. If you want to contemplate how little has changed since *The Empire Strikes Back*, all you have to do is look at *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, or *Lord of the Rings*, or any of the pile of films that use science-fiction fantasy as coin of the realm, to see that Jim Crow is a part, unintentional or not, of otherworldly stories of heroes.

Two years after the ignominy of *Batman Forever*—with a title that seemed to describe the picture's running time—Lucas rereleased

the *Star Wars* trilogy, celebrating the twentieth anniversary of the theatrical debut of the first picture. When I saw *The Empire Strikes Back* at the Cinema Dome in Los Angeles, the crowd's full-throated cheers, voicing its unanimous approval for the most down brother ever to blast into hyper-drive, erased, for just a moment, the embarrassment of the Colt 45 commercials, the endless string of straight-to-cable misadventures Williams endured, and Lucas's subsequent misfires. And for a beat, Lando Calrissian, the first owner of the *Millennium Falcon*—before he dropped the spacecraft's pink slip to Han Solo in a card game—was back where he belonged, in the captain's seat of the galaxy's most beloved freedom ride. Williams's bemused charisma was literally far-flung, and the endless skies of the many planets twinkling behind him seemed bountiful, full of dreams for him and the audience members who saw his very presence there as a glimpse of a future that still, as yet, has not really come to be. But, for a little over two hours, all seemed right in a world a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away.

THE CHRYSANTHEMUM AND THE LIGHTSABER

ERIKA KROUSE

[1]

I was having a beer with my karate dojo after practice one night when I raised the question, "Are you a *Star Trek* person or a *Star Wars* person?"

"Do you have to be one or the other?" one man asked.

"Yes."

They didn't even pause to think about it. "*Star Wars*." "*Star Wars*." "*Star Wars*." "*Star Wars*." "*Star Wars*." "*Star Wars*." "*Star Wars*." "*Star Wars*." "*Star Trek*" (he was a computer programmer). "*Star Wars*."

"Why?" I asked. "Why *Star Wars*?"

Nobody spoke for a few seconds. Then my *sensei* shrugged and said, "It's the hero's journey."

That seemed to say it all, and the subject was changed to football.

[II]

The hero's journey begins at home, when he's just fledgling potential. He is a special child, a leader. He could save the world. Or something could go wrong, and he could blow up the World Trade Center. What makes him change into something mighty, or something horrible? Nature, nurture, or neither?

[III]

It's no secret that George Lucas was in love with samurai films, as am I. Akira Kurosawa's *Hidden Fortress* is a near montage of *Star Wars* scenes, from the two lost strangelings arguing in the desert at the beginning of *Star Wars* to an equine replica of Princess Leia chasing the Stormtroopers through the forest in *Return of the Jedi*. The characters are prototypes—there's even a samurai version of Han Solo.

Star Wars' costumes alone establish this samurai influence. Vader's helmet is nearly identical to *kabuto* bowl-like samurai helmets, with the sides winging out at angles and a *mempo* faceplate to hide emotions and terrify enemies. Stormtrooper uniforms (which always looked uncomfortable to me, and hard to keep clean) were also modeled after samurai armor. Samurai Vadesque robes were originally designed by the Japanese to disguise the movement of feet. When Vader moves, he floats.

Vader is pure warrior; he has mastered himself, his sword (lightsaber, whatever), and his emotions. But if Vader is a twisted samurai, the Jedi Knights are more in the spirit of the samurai ideal. Take *Phantom Menace*—Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi wear long samurai robes and obi (wide belts), with samurai top-knots in their long hair. They also use (neon) swords, the soul

weapon of the samurai warrior class. As guiding spiritual ideologies, the samurai had Zen, and the Jedi have the Force.

I am fascinated by warriors, fighters. In karate class, I pile my hair into a samurai topknot. I have necrophiliac crushes on Che Guevara and Bruce Lee, and my very first child-love was Muhammad Ali. While actual strategic war never thrilled me, I love the renegade warrior—his independence, his instant decisions, his cohesive moral code. I love how the drawing of one weapon necessitates the drawing of another. I love how the ethical battle is always decided by the outcome of the physical one.

Sick, perhaps. Or maybe just a bid for simplicity in a weird world where death can come by opening a letter. I want ethics in arms. I want a world where battles are fought by fighters, not computers or terrorists. I want the bad guy to wear black, and the good guy to save the day.

[IV]

I had decided to take karate lessons because I was afraid of violence. Violence, not pain—I never had a problem with pain. I often looked down at my legs, surprised to find a deep, crusty gash, or a purple bruise blooming untended. It's still that way, except now parts of my body refuse to bruise, the way abused children refuse to cry. Sometimes I'll notice blood on the floor of the dojo and call out, "Someone's bleeding!" Everyone will stop and check their toes, their arms, their noses. But it will be me.

Yet I dissolved into sudden tears when my friend Lisa threw an ice cube in my face. Ditto when a lover's sleeping fist collided with my eye. Ditto when my father turned on me in a sudden rage, even from a distance. Or when I bent down to pet a stranger's puffy chow chow, and he bit me, softly but cruelly.

I started taking karate classes in 1998, during a particularly nasty breakup. I had been crying convulsively for four days, and I only stopped to go to my first karate class. Halfway into it, the *sen-*

sei gave us pads to practice punching and kicking. I was paired with the only other woman, who was a black belt. I thought, *She's a little skinny chick like me. No problem.* I held a large pad for her and she kicked it, once. My left contact lens stayed where it was while the rest of my body flew backwards into the wall.

We found the contact lens, and I hurried to the bathroom to poke it back into my eye. I looked through the mirror at my chapped eyes, rabbity around the edges, dirty lens stuck to my finger, and thought, *What the hell am I doing?*

[V]

When a samurai warrior wanted to further his training, he didn't seek out other fighters. He instead found a Zen master to teach him how to meditate. Zen Master Hakuin Ekaku (1686–1768) said, "Meditation in the midst of action is a billion times superior to meditation in stillness." Conversely, the samurai believed that action in the midst of meditation was a billion times superior to action in the midst of anything else.

The samurai were attracted to Zen Buddhism with its emphasis on simplicity and self-control, full awareness of each moment, and tranquillity in the face of death. Zen Buddhism was also infused with Shinto, the Japanese national religion. Shinto is a sophisticated form of animism, in which all of nature is imbued with spirit (*shin*), very similar to Yoda's somewhat muddled animism.

Samurai and Jedi ideologies are nearly identical. Zen Master Taisen Deshimaru defined Zen spirituality in the following manner:

Our life is not just *in* our body, it is a perpetual exchange with the life of the universe. Understanding this interdependence comes with the perception of *ku* or nothingness, vacuity. . . . The manifestation of *ku* is infinite, limitless energy, which is accessible to us when we are in harmony with universal life; we are invested by it unconsciously, naturally, without any resistance.

Compare with Yoda's Force:

Life creates it. Makes it grow. Its energy surrounds us and binds us. Luminous beings are we—not this crude matter. You must feel the force around you—here, between you, me, the tree, the rock, everywhere. Yes! Even between the land and the ship.

Yoda is the archetypal martial arts teacher. He's small, old, and ugly. He looks like someone you'd push off a bar stool. He's more powerful than his physical capacity, which is the point of martial arts. Speaks funny English he does. He knows secrets about you, and he keeps them from you, until he doesn't. He is cranky. He eats disgusting food. He catches you at your assumptions.

Like Zen masters who only teach focus and meditation, Yoda didn't teach Luke any fighting technique at all. He never once matched swords with Luke. Instead, Luke had to condition his body and mind, standing on one hand, balancing Yoda on his foot, levitating rocks and neatly piling them on top of each other. He strapped Yoda onto his back and did acrobatics through the jungle, while Yoda yammered in his ear about the Force.

Particulars aside, this approach is actually very similar to traditional martial arts training—physical and spiritual conditioning through seemingly unrelated tasks. There are tales of fighters retreating to the woods to punch trees for two years, or you might have seen people hitting the *makiwara* (wooden post wrapped in padding), or shoving their hands into buckets of sand. In *The Karate Kid*, waxing a car. I know men who punch walls, and one man who bashes his big toe against the ground every day, building the muscle in his feet. He can now toe-kick a person to death, if he's ever attacked while barefoot.

A typical training in my dojo begins with sit-ups, push-ups, lunges, running, exercises, basics (punching, blocking, kicking), and star jumps (be glad that you don't know what these are). Once we're tired, we do kata (forms), and *bunkai* (full-contact kata-based fights), trying to keep our focus and technique in the face of

physical depletion. The idea is, this is when karate counts—when you're at a loss.

Still, we don't train in a swamp, or prepare to fight Osama bin Laden. Nine-hundred-year-old Yoda is not our *sensei*. My *sensei*'s name is Paul. He is a buff, good-looking man, thirty-four years old, with a job in Internet sales. Barbara-*sensei*, his beautiful and brutal wife, is a professional comedian and teaches karate class when *sensei* is on business trips. The two of them are open, generous, and a lot of fun. There are no swamp creatures, no yelling. They don't make us enter dark caves with a lightsaber, or lift aircraft with our minds. Barbara-*sensei* is Canadian. I have it pretty easy, comparatively.

[VI]

There has always been an element of mystique in the martial arts, for good reason. Many artists demonstrate seemingly miraculous feats—extinguishing flames with the “energy” of their strike, brushing aside multiple attackers while seated, killing charging bulls with one punch. In *The Phantom Menace*, the prospect of two Jedi armed with lightsabers was more daunting than an army of murderous blaster-toting droids.

If you break martial arts down into technique, the mystique doesn't fade—it gets stronger. You can know exactly how a fighter moved—reproduce it, even—but never achieve the same effect. As it is impossible to break a work of art into a formula of techniques, a martial art also surpasses such explanation. Even so, technique is the only means we have to understanding a martial theory. Let's look at the fighting technique of the Jedi.

Rules of engagement don't preclude multiple attackers, but *Star Wars* preserves the old tradition (both Western and Eastern) of single combat between leaders of opposing forces deciding an issue. In *Star Wars*, these hand-to-hand battles serve as a microcosm for the fights in space, but they also demonstrate how the

spirits of these two leaders—Darth Vader and Luke—provide a foundation for the fight as a whole.

In these battles, Darth and Luke both prefer the same weapons—the lightsaber and the Force. Regarding their actual combat technique, the fighters depart from Western fighting styles and embrace the Eastern. The most popular Western style of swordplay is fencing, using a light lance for duels. Fencers mostly keep a low stance with both legs bent, occasionally lunging for strikes. They thrust and parry with one arm, the other arm free for balance, their bodies turned fully sideways to eliminate most of the targets on their bodies. They move sideways like crabs, traversing the same line to exhibit control and to force the sword to do most of the evasion work. Parries and strikes are very controlled, using small circles and direct thrusts with the tip of the sword.

Although the Jedi do use some fencing techniques, their style of fighting most closely resembles Japanese kendo, an ancient style of swordplay dating from as early as 400 C.E. Jedi Knights grip the lightsaber with both hands, facing their opponent frontally, rather than sideways. They trade the speed of fencing for the mighty blows of kendo, deflecting blaster fire and cutting through metal with their force. As the *Star Wars* trilogy progresses, the fighting becomes more cohesive, with more dynamic moves. Most of their strikes are swipes from the side or over the head, striking with the edge rather than the tip of the weapon. The Jedi allow gravity and the momentum of their swings to move their sabers diagonally from side to side, often in a shallow figure-eight fashion.

Although they sometimes balance themselves in the center between two bent legs, it seems that the Jedi's basic stance is the lunge or the half lunge, with the front leg bent and the rear leg nearly straight, allowing the forward motion of their bodies to augment the force of their strokes. When they strike, they don't poke at a dainty target—they swipe *through* the opponent, following through on their stroke the way golfers do. They don't aim for the target necessarily—they aim for a point beyond the target. This is a technique emphasized in most of the Asian martial arts—striking

through your target to the space beyond it, in order to penetrate the target fully.

This technique is what makes martial arts so powerful. Fighters of the Asian martial arts usually commit their body weight to a stroke, delivering few blows of force, rather than a multitude of lighter strokes. The martial artist is more apt to give up ground than the fighters of Western arts (boxing, fencing, etc.), realizing that it only takes one successful blow to end the conflict forever. For this reason, many martial artists do not engage in tournament fights, which focus on the accumulation of points by striking a target repeatedly in a fight, lightly or otherwise. For the purists (and the Jedi), the aim of engaging in conflict is to end the argument quickly, with one killing blow.

[VII]

So why, why, why, why, why do this strange thing? As Han Solo said, "Hokey religions and ancient weapons are no match for a good blaster at your side." If I'm learning karate for self-defense, why not save time and buy a gun?

I guess I'm not studying karate for self-defense after all, although that was why I started. I had the illusion that I would be invulnerable if I knew how to protect myself. Like Luke, I came from bad stock, a line of men gone wrong. My grandfather chased my grandmother around with a knife, beat his children. One uncle pulled out a gun when he was angry, beat his children. My father, when he was around, beat his children.

Often, people who had rough childhoods study martial arts when they grow up. You couldn't toss a throwing star across a dojo (if anyone actually knew how to do that anymore) without catching one such person on each prong. Beaten boys, raped girls, bully-fodder, short people—many of them grow up and study karate, tae kwon do, kung fu, or jiu-jitsu. Some of these people come to my dojo. They understand violence; they understand survival. They are

usually the ones who have the easiest time learning karate, and the hardest time controlling themselves.

One talented fighter (we'll call him Han) had grown up with a terrible father of the extinguishing-cigarettes-on-son's-skin caliber. He taught martial arts at a dojo I sometimes visited to learn new techniques.

One day in class Han ordered a student to hit him. The student promptly punched Han in the nose. His nose visibly broke. Han said, "Hit me again." The student did. Blood everywhere. "Again." The student balked. "Again," Han insisted, ignoring the thickness of his voice, as if he only had a head cold. The student said, "Um, I don't . . . I think . . ." Han looked at him, blood waterfalling down his face. Then he said, "You pussy."

This is not the Force. Nor is it the Dark Side, really. This is the stuff of kamikaze pilots, of gladiators, of heroin addicts. This is Generation X violence, Camus violence, shooting an Arab because, hey, why not? This is the stuff that happens when you've seen tragedy, and you're half-fascinated, half-bored with the way that nothing, anymore, is unimaginable.

[VIII]

As fathers go, I think Darth Vader wasn't atypical for my father's generation. Menacing, uncommunicative, prone to wild violences. Obsessed with his career, rotten to his family. So, okay, Luke's father happened to be the menace of the universe, and mine just worked for IBM. But I could tell that the nasty things both of them did with their days filled them with impotence and rage, and at evenings at my house, those two things created an explosive mixture.

I'm sure Darth Vader thought he was doing his best. After all, he doesn't even know he has a son, and when he finds out, he tries to teach him the tricks of the trade, adopt him into the family business. He doesn't want to hurt his son, necessarily.

But time goes on, and Luke is stubborn, defiant. He won't turn. Darth Vader looks at his progeny and thinks, *Why isn't he more like me? And yet he is so much like me.* The two elements together are infuriating. He wants answers. He thinks, *I gave this boy life, and I can take it away, too. Who will stop me?*

I saw *Star Wars* for the first time in a drive-in when I was eight, on vacation in Cape Cod with my family. It was after a fight between my father and me, and I brooded in the back seat of the car while the screen flashed pale, soggy images and the speaker barked dialogue, sounding like a person shouting into a tin can far, far away. Space, yeah. Death Star, so what. The robots were okay. I wasn't into it.

And then, right behind my father's head, I saw Darth Vader floating down a white hallway. Black robes, helmet, asthma. Brutal, invulnerable, accountable for nothing. His black eyes were opaque, his expression permanently grim, ready to hurt without any thought of consequences or control. It was the lack of remorse that told me everything. Even then, long before the release of *The Empire Strikes Back*, I knew who he was. I knew he was somebody's father.

[IX]

After I had studied martial arts for a while, I became reckless. I insisted on walking along East Colfax in Denver at night sometimes, alone in a short skirt. Crackheads veered toward me, whispering in my ear. I heard the word "pussy" a lot. One man slowed down his low rider until it kept pace with me. "How much?" he asked, and then cracked his door to see what I'd do. A prostitute chased me off her corner, screaming in pink glitter heels. Alleys. Abandoned lots in Five Points, smoking a cigarette by a fence. Men with scary bulges in their pockets. "Hey little girl, hey, hey, come over here." Once I passed a cop car with three cuffed men slumping forward on the hood. The cop turned to me and said slowly, "Ma'am. Get out of this neighborhood. Now."

In *Beyond Good and Evil*, Nietzsche warns: "Under conditions of peace, the warlike man attacks himself."

I danced with dangerous-looking men in dive bars, disappointed when they turned out polite, kind.

I'd daydream at work, playing imaginary fights in my head. I'd stare at the wall, thinking of what I'd do, and what I'd do next.

I left my apartment door unlocked. I undressed in front of my open window, lights on, shutter up. I lay alone in the dark, heart ticking, thinking, OK, *come and get me. Try it.*

[X]

Justice, courage, compassion, courtesy, truthfulness, honor, and loyalty: this is the code of the samurai warrior. Sounds simple. But each of these ideals is its own *koan*, or unsolvable riddle—should Luke be loyal to his friends or to his father? How can Luke show compassion toward his father if it renders him unable to kill Vader and defeat the evil that is inherent in him? How can Luke be truthful to a deceptive liar? What is courage without fear? And what the hell is honor anyway?

When a samurai had dishonored himself (and therefore his family, his lord, his clan, his prefecture, etc.), he was given the option of seppuku, or self-immolation. He performed a ritual commonly known as *hara-kiri*, where the warrior disemboweled himself with a sword shortly before an executioner incompletely severed his head from his body, leaving it dangling from a flap of skin. Although seppuku was formally banned in the 1600s, Japanese people often still commit suicide today when they fear dishonor: students throw themselves in front of trains if their test scores are too low, and girls with unplanned pregnancies slash their wrists. Bloody and vicious, seppuku was considered to be the honorable last resort, when there were no other options left.

The samurai neither ran from nor embraced his death. He conditioned himself until he accepted death as a part of his life. He

was ready at any moment for death to come. If the warrior accepted death, his life was qualitatively stronger. Only then could he realize his full potential as a warrior, willing to die for his cause.

At two points in the trilogy, Luke commits incomplete acts of seppuku to preserve his honor. The first is during a lightsaber fight with Darth Vader in *Empire Strikes Back*, when Vader reveals that he is Luke's father. Vader holds out an open hand, asking Luke to join him so they can rule the Empire together, as father and son. Luke is dangling from a pole. He realizes that to live, he will have to take the gloved hand and embrace the Dark Side. Instead, Luke releases the pole and falls through space, deciding to die rather than succumb. But of course Leia rescues him and Luke lives to fight again as a Jedi.

The other act of seppuku occurs in *Return of the Jedi*, when Luke surrenders to the Empire and enters the Death Star to save his father's soul, knowing that it will soon be bombed by the Alliance. He is ready to die. When the Emperor says that Luke will turn to the Dark Side, Luke says, "You're wrong. Soon I'll be dead. And you with me." Luke does not choose to fight (except for some gratuitous lightsaber scenes with Vader) and refuses to kill his father, surrendering his own life instead. Luke relies on the reemergence of "good" in his father to save his own life, in spite of the fact that he had never seen any evidence of this "good" in Vader before. Vader is an evil monster. But Luke believes in him anyway. Because Darth Vader is his father.

[XI]

My black belt test wasn't a mighty battle. I didn't have to face my father, my demons, my worst fears. I didn't have to enter a cave, combat evil, fight intergalactic terrorism, or explode a Death Star. I had to do a lot of kata and fight everyone in the dojo. All of them were bigger than me, up to twice my weight. It was hard. It was long. I remember at one point casually wondering whether I was

going to pass out, throw up, or both at once. The test took place over two days, and when it was over I was physically, mentally, and emotionally exhausted.

Even so, after I passed the test, got the belt, and wore it, I thought, *That's it?* I had thought that maybe getting a black belt would mean that I could now do great things. Fight crime! Walk on water! But I'm still clumsy. I still occasionally punch myself in the eye (hard to do, but possible). I'm still lifetimes away from what I want to be.

Maybe I had thought that it would cleanse me, birth me anew into a purer world. Where I came from would no longer matter. I wouldn't feel the way I do, like I come from something violent and cruel, and that maybe I've got that same thing lurking inside of me.

[XII]

Enemies have changed. I grew up in the Cold War, thinking that your enemies were distant and untouchable. They hid behind nuclear weapons, which allow a soldier to kill without the inconvenience of seeing the victim.

But things are coming full circle. Nuclear weapons have rendered themselves useless in their potential for total annihilation. So our enemies are creeping closer, laying down their missiles. They're using the old-fashioned tools of war—poison, blades, fists, and the will to die.

We'd all like to think the Force is with us. Nobody wants to be evil. But it's not so simple in real life. Greed is ambition with a twist, and vengeance is nearly interchangeable with justice. Violence is justified as self-defense, or survival of the fittest. Forgiveness is often just weak desperation. The Dark Side is relative—plenty of people own stock in Exxon, eat veal, put razor blades in apples. Think of arsonists, or people who write anonymous hate mail, people who throw lit cigarettes at dogs. Even unresolved issues can make you a candidate for succumbing to the Dark Side.

Most of us are never given the luxury of a showdown, or an opportunity to save the world. Of course, we would try, given the chance—we'd have nothing to lose. But most of our battles are smaller, and there's plenty to lose. I don't know the difference between being brave and fighting for the sake of fighting. You can believe in something so much that you just inflict your own personal war on people of peace.

[XIII]

Luke is training at Yoda's outdoor dojo and notices a dark cave. Yoda says, "In you must go."

Luke asks, "What's in there?"

"Only what you take with you," Yoda answers.

Yoda tells Luke to leave his weapons outside. Luke gives him a long look and then brings them anyway. Upon entering the cave, he encounters Vader and draws his weapon first. The fight is over in a few cursory strokes, and Luke lops Vader's head off. It rolls to a stop, and then explodes, revealing Luke's own head, his own face.

Zen Master Deshimaru wrote, "You must not take out your sword because if you try to kill someone, you must die for it yourself. What you must do instead is kill yourself, kill your own mind. . . . You are the strongest and the others keep their distance. It is no longer necessary to win victories over them."

But can I do this thing myself? Is the Force with me? I suspect No. I can hang a spoon from the tip of my nose, but that's about it as far as levitation is concerned. Can I fight without fighting? Could I close my eyes to land a torpedo in the belly of the Death Star? I have always had the sinking suspicion that if I were a character in a movie, I'd be the first unnecessary death, the first plane to go down, the first person to be deceived by the enemy in disguise.

To fight is to plunge into the unknown, armed only with your skills and liabilities, which are often identical. Questions to ask before you fight: What do you bring with you into that cave? How

do you let it go? And most important, how do you survive once you do?

[XIV]

The thing is, I don't want to let go. I don't want Luke's capacity for forgiveness, Ben's objective respect, Yoda's Zen. They're not practical. Yoda told Luke that he'll never be a Jedi until he confronts his father. But things are simple in *Star Wars*. It's a movie. What do you do with a person who has no remorse? Luke used his own life as bait to save his father. Will I do the same?

Really, no.

I believe in the power of compassion, I do. But I also believe in Nietzsche, who wrote, "He who fights with monsters should look to it that he himself does not become a monster. And when you gaze long into an abyss the abyss also gazes into you."

It's hard for a Jewish girl to say this, but I've suffered enough. The last time my father and I did anything noncombative together was when I was eighteen. To bond or whatever, he took me to a Mets game. Even just sitting in the plastic seat next to him felt dangerous, like being sucked into the undertow of a tidal wave. I didn't know what to do. I was so nervous, I ate five hot dogs in the first two innings and then threw up in the stadium bathroom at the bottom of the fourth. The Mets lost.

After a long war, it's hard to stop fighting. It's what you're trained to do, what you're good at. I, however, am tired of it. I don't want to fight my father anymore. So I fight everything else.

I haven't been without a bruise in four years. When I wear shorts, people look at my legs with concern. Look at that battered girl. Look at her arms. Sometimes I have a fat lip, and I suck on it. I limp without noticing. Nothing really hurts anymore.

All this damage says to me: I can handle anything, and I can handle the price I have to pay in order to handle it. My shins are ridged with scar tissue. My jaw still clicks from the time it was

dislocated—likewise with both of my thumbs. My body is sore 100 percent of the time. My friends make fun of me, jumping in the air and shouting “Wotcha!” Some of them think I’m sick, calling karate “your macho theatrics.”

But it feels real, what I do in the dojo against another person. It doesn’t feel violent. It feels like the opposite of violence. Everything blends together into a pure focus. I forget everything except for what I’m doing in that moment. There’s a point where my body’s so tired, it’s like slow dying. And there’s something there, some Force, which makes me feel most alive while I’m taking this mock journey toward death.

But I know this isn’t what they mean at all.

It’s hard to realize that I’m just not strong enough. I want the hero’s journey. But I doubt the integrity of my battles. When I fight, I still see my own face in my opponent’s, my own fears reflected. I’m still looking for clues as to what I’m made of, trying to understand the nature of this war I’ve invented for myself. And to prepare for a future victory—to see which side, if any, will win.



THE FORCE VISITS WILLOUGHBY, OHIO

ELWOOD REID

The summer *Star Wars* hit, I was, for lack of a better word, a pussy. And although I was large for my age, recent growth spurts had left me mushy and awkward, body shy in a neighborhood full of delinquents, gas huffers, S.P.E.D.s (older and unpredictably violent Special Ed kids or short bussers, who after years of torture had turned mean), brave turn-the-other-cheek Christians, thug jocks, burn-outs, and pre-ADD nutjobs whose favorite trick was to ask if you'd ever met the Jackson Five and when you answered "no" they would then show you five knuckles, punch you in the mouth, and laugh at your fat-lipped stupidity.

I'd been in only one real fistfight and lost—chipped tooth, bloody nose, and a face full of snow. The noble peacenik wisdom of "Run and live to fight another day" didn't mean shit in northeast Ohio. You either avoided conflict altogether or you joined the fray, took your lumps, and picked your spots. The trick was to survive until you could defend yourself. One way to keep the bullies and thrill-seeking sadists from circling was to strike a pose—model yourself on some widely understood tough guy and hope the powers that be bought the act long enough for you to actually grow

balls and stand up to them. A few kids opted to be Steve Austin—The Six Million Dollar Man (a complicated act, involving lots of slow-motion running and odd sound effects), others modeled themselves on Jack Lambert—the Pittsburgh Steeler's viscous mook of a linebacker who along with Mean Joe Greene (another model tough guy until the Pepsi commercial) regularly destroyed our beloved Cleveland Browns. There were even a few kids who went around talking and acting like Muhammad Ali, dazzling their would-be intimidators and upsetting their vaguely racist fathers with butchered white-boy versions of The Greatest's poetic taunts. Then *Star Wars* arrived, and with it a whole new set of other-worldly heroes.

I remember dashing out of the packed theater still in the grips of the film—fists clenched and heart racing as kids made thrumming lightsaber sounds, panted like Darth Vader, and proclaimed the movie cool. I took out the small finger-shaped piece of meteorite I carried with me at all times and held it to the sky wanting very badly to be called away to a planet far, far away and launched on some great adventure. (I believed in aliens and UFOs, and the discovery of the large meteorite earlier that spring and its subsequent confiscation by NASA lab rats—another story—had only reinforced my irrational hope that if and when aliens landed they would know me by the piece of meteorite that I carried, slept with, and stroked.) But nothing happened, and as I walked across the bright parking lot, the movie magic fading fast, I pondered my own rapidly changing place in the neighborhood. Like Luke, I would have to master my fears and strike out on the dark adventures of adolescence, without the benefit of lightsabers or the Force.

We lived on a dead-end street in a town called Willoughby on the outskirts of Cleveland. Behind our house sat a massive abandoned polo field, once part of an exclusive country club that was perched on a lush green hill. The Club, with its wrought-iron gate and rarely glimpsed clubhouse, was a constant reminder that there were

people out there who ate shrimp cocktail more than once a year, drove silent German sedans, vacationed in Europe, and talked knowledgeably of horses and stock portfolios. Nobody in our neighborhood was a member of the Club and, except for a few lucky kids who caddied, nobody even knew a member of the Club. Even the adults sneaked onto its impossibly green golf course to fish for bass or look for lost golf balls, only to be chased off by the greenkeeper or chewed out by some white-haired rich guy as he lined up his tee shot. But through some Robin Hoodlike justice of subdivision, the polo field and surrounding woods had been orphaned by the new interstate, leaving its use and rule to the strip of "have not" families whose houses bordered its edges.

The woods were full of swamps, small creeks, abandoned cars, interstate trash, a power relay station, and dozens of forts that had been built, destroyed, and rebuilt by the various and sundry gangs. For better or worse every last one of us were Willo-Billies. We played baseball, smear-the-queer, and nasty war games in the field using any and all weapons at our disposal—BB guns, wrist rockets, stick swords, tent stakes, mud balls (with or without rocks), Polish cannons, sharpened lawn darts, golf balls, Pepsi bottle bombs, etc.

The bullies of the moment were Sharon and Richard Moros (not their real names), or the Morons if you dared. They lived just down the street in a seedy red ranch house, the front yard decorated with beer cans, busted lawn chairs, and a partially disassembled white Chevy Ranchero. Richard had thick black glasses, yellow teeth, a laugh like Woody the Woodpecker, and an endless supply of M-80s which he tossed down sewers or at unsuspecting fat kids who were too slow and trusting to know when they were being fired upon. As bullies go, Richard wasn't big or particularly strong, just crazy and unpredictable. Most importantly he loved to fight and did not care if he won or lost. Whenever there was a shortage of pansies to pound on, Richard would fight older jocks, his sister, and even the occasional stray dog with equal gusto and disregard for his own well-being. Older kids, who at first had easily whipped Richard, gave up after the third or fourth rematch and refused to fight him because he didn't fight by any of the rules. He

bit, kicked, spit, threw knives, grabbed balls, poked eyes—anything. And if you tried to run, Richard would chase you down on his lime green banana bike, riding no hands as he launched buckeyes from his trusty wrist rocket, lost in the thrill of the hunt.

Sharon was two years older than her brother and looked like some butch version of Peppermint Patty. She had red hair, crooked teeth, biceps, and unfortunately large freckles which she made up for with the handjobs she was rumored to dispense with alarming regularity in dark scrap-carpeted fort rooms and damp basements. You called her Red Baron at great risk, because her boyfriends, large army-jacketed stoners, would grab and hold you down while Sharon burned you with her Led Zeppelin lighter or forced you to sniff Rush until you passed out.

The summer of *Star Wars*, the Morons and their band ruled the woods and polo field. They wrecked our forts, destroyed bikes, and frequently broke up baseball games because, according to Richard, baseball was “for faggots.” But as the summer wore on I knew that I would have to make a stand against the Moron gang or else be forced to abandon the small corners of woods and polo field my brother and our group of friends had managed to claim as our own. I didn’t know how I was going to do this. But avoiding conflict in a neighborhood built on conflict was becoming increasingly difficult.

Unlike many of my peers I didn’t geekily obsess over the robots or cool X-wing fighters. C-3PO was annoying (or gay, in the pre-PC parlance of the times) and would have been immediately beaten and pulped were he to ever crash-land in our neighborhood. And R2-D2 reminded me of the shop-vac my father rolled out for us during the weekly and dreaded garage cleanings, which due to his pack-rat mentality became our own Aegean stables. Instead, in my search for heroes I focused on the old-fashioned swashbuckling bravery and the struggle between good and evil waged by Luke, Darth, and Han Solo in *Star Wars*—the largest and most formidable cultural event to hit Ohio.

My first impression was that Luke was a bit of a wuss, always

doubting and worried. Of course I admired the cocky cool of Han Solo even though I knew I did not possess the tousled bravado or flair for snappy comebacks required to pull off such an act. So I settled on Darth because he was a man of few words and taller than everybody else. Darth did not take any shit. Darth knew what he wanted and would kill to get it. I practiced on the smaller members of our gang, randomly strangling Scott Legan when he refused to play right field or whacking his older brother John with a stick when he insisted on harassing the opposing batter in his Spock voice, "That was an illogical swing, Lugnuts," etc.

There was a problem with my Darth act, though. It only worked on friends—the weak, the halt, and the lame. It had yet to be tested on my foes. So when Richard Moros and his pyromaniac sidekick, Julius, attacked our fort one day, I stood my ground, Darthlike, waiting for the moment to strike. My refusal to run momentarily confused Richard and Julius. Normal operating procedure called for me to retreat behind the rickety plywood walls and let the siege begin.

After huddling with Julius, Richard shouted, "You retarded or something Reid?"

When I didn't answer, Richard directed Julius to lob a chunk of concrete at my head. It missed and for a moment the power of the Dark Side convinced me to take a few steps toward them, thinking I could get close enough to slap the Darth clamp on their dirty throats. From the safety of the fort my crew began to shout encouragement. But then Richard, eager to preserve custom, pulled out his wrist rocket and bounced a golf ball off my shin. I quickly crawled back to the fort, trying to hold back the tears of pain as my gang launched a volley of mud balls, sticks, and stones at the invaders until Richard and Julius lost interest and left to steal cigarettes from the 7-Eleven.

I'd been brave, but it was no consolation for the purple knot on my shin or the fact that I had now officially entered the Moroses' radar as a potential roadblock in their campaign of terror.

I went home that night and reconsidered the Darth act, finally

admitting to myself that wuss or no wuss I had far more in common with Luke than I did with Vader or the rock-star cool Han Solo.

A second viewing of *Star Wars* with John Legan confirmed this fact. As we left the theater John pulled up his hooded sweatshirt and began talking like Obi-Wan Kenobi, calling me Luke and raising his fingers mystically to indicate some errant bit of the Force that had found its way to Ohio and was waiting for me to tap into it.

If Luke had the Force to wrestle with, I had to master my own fears, not just of the Moroses and their gang, but of serial killers. The summer of 1977 was not just the summer of *Stars Wars*, it was also the Summer of Sam. Additionally, I'd spent way too much time reading a copy of Vincent Bugliosi's account of the Manson family murders, *Helter Skelter*, which I'd stolen from my parents' bedroom. I obsessed over Charles Manson and his swastika-ed followers the way other kids geeked out over Spider Man comic books or Wacky Packs. I memorized the crime-scene photos—the word PIG scrawled in blood, ropes used to bind the victims, and of course the beautiful, but already dead, Sharon Tate. I sometimes dreamed of rescuing her only to be overwhelmed by the band of murderous hippies.

Serial killers were not just something that happened other places. Two weeks after I'd seen *Star Wars* again and had decided to drop the Darth act, our morning game of baseball was interrupted by a long line of police cars and unmarked FBI sedans pulling down the overgrown cinder road on the far side the polo field.

"It's the cops," Lugnuts shouted. A few older kids tossed cigarettes, grabbed mitts and bats, and sped away on stolen bikes, squealing like pigs, bravely flipping off the distant policemen.

The rest of us quickly followed suit and scattered, convinced that the police had finally figured out the source of the rocks dropped off the overpass at oncoming cars or the petty acts of arson and vandalism in and around the neighborhood, not to mention the thousands of prank and obscene phone calls.

I retreated to the woodpile and waited for the sirens. But after

ten minutes the police were still out there talking and pointing. Curious, I snuck back, threading my way through the undergrowth until I was no more than twenty feet from the police officers and FBI agents. They were studying a map spread on the hood of a car. After a brief discussion, one of the officers opened the back of a cruiser and hauled a man from the back seat. He was dressed in a blaze orange jumpsuit, his legs and hands bound in long chains. He had shaggy black hair, a patchy beard, and a series of muddled tattoos on his powerful forearms. But it was his eyes that got me. They were featureless black slots chopped into his heavy brow, rimmed with dark circles that seemed to suck in all of the available light. He muttered something to his captors, pointed at the leg chain, and seemed to test them. I knew in an instant he'd done something bad and that here in my own backyard was the sum of all my *Helter Skelter* fears.

As I strained to get a closer look, one of the officers spotted me.

"Get out of there, kid," he said, parting the bushes with his nightstick.

I knew enough not to run and so I rose from my hiding place slowly, sure that at any moment he'd slap the cuffs on me and toss me into the backseat next to the man in the orange jumpsuit.

He asked me what I was doing.

"Nothing," I replied in a quivering voice.

He smiled and helped me out of the bushes and asked me how well I knew the woods.

I shrugged and said, "Pretty good."

"Ever find anything unusual?"

"Like what?"

"Oh, I don't know," he said. "We're just looking is all. Look kid, you'd better . . ."

Just then the man in the orange jumpsuit stopped his catatonic pacing and stared at me. We locked eyes and I felt the cold stab of fear as he shuffled across a small ditch toward me, muttering in an agitated rumble about my presence. Transfixed, I stood my ground and returned his stare. I did not run or drop to the ground in a

quivering heap. Sure, I was scared but as the man got closer I swallowed my fear and felt strong and brave for having done so, even as one of the officers jerked him back and pointed at the barbed-wire fence running alongside the interstate.

"You better go home now," the officer said, patting me on the shoulder and sending me on my way.

Later I learned that the man had killed several women and remembered burying one of their bodies in a field next to the freeway. The search of the polo field turned up nothing, but that didn't stop us from scouring the field for unmarked graves and discarded murder weapons. Next to the freeway we found an old blue Samsonite suitcase somebody had tossed from a car. We took the suitcase back to our fort and bashed it open with a rock. Inside were several heavily soiled men's dress shirts, pairs of mismatched socks, a metal nail file, Alka-Seltzer tablets, and dozens of foil-packed Trojan condoms. On one of the shirts we found what looked like bloodstains and we all knew in the twisted logic of ten-, eleven-, and twelve-years-olds that the suitcase belonged to the man in the orange jumpsuit. We burned the shirts, kept the condoms, and vowed to tell no one of our discovery.

I also stopped reading *Helter Skelter* and, in retelling the story of how I'd stood my ground as the psycho had come after me, my role grew more and more heroic even though I'd yet to stand up to the relatively harmless Moroses. I had, however, learned to face my fears.

By the time I saw *Star Wars* for a third and final time (again with John Legan who had now combined his Spock act with a reasonably good Obi-Wan imitation), the Moroses had completed construction of their Death Star—a massive two-story fort built from the remnants of our recently destroyed fort and loads of lumber pinched from a nearby subdivision. They'd furnished the inside with discarded sofas and orange shag carpeting, ashtrays, and black-light Blue Oyster Cult and Boston posters. The surrounding area

was littered with beer cans, old tires, cigarette butts, and even a condom wrapper.

On one of our reconnaissance missions we watched as Sharon Moros spray-painted ZEPPELIN RULES in drippy red scrawl across the front of the fort while her boyfriend of the moment, a tall pale thug we called Lurch, looked on, smoking cigarettes and fingering the Daisy pellet gun he held in his lap. Richard emerged, saw us watching, and tapped his sister on the shoulder, pointing. Sharon flipped us off while Richard mooned us, shouting, "Thanks for the wood ya homos."

He laughed his Woody the Woodpecker laugh as Lurch loaded his gun and began pumping it methodically. We quickly retreated, vowing to knock the fort down after they'd gone home for dinner.

We discussed our options, which included tricking Johnny the Retard (too unpredictable and liable to rat us out later under interrogation from Sharon) into knocking the fort down, or stealing some of my father's gasoline and setting fire to it (too risky—earlier that year we'd nearly set the whole woods on fire), or we could simply attempt the unthinkable and knock it down ourselves and face the consequences. As it got darker our numbers dwindled so that by the time we set off for the Death Star there were only four of us—my brother Jeff, John and Scott Legan, and myself. John wisely assumed the role of sage adviser and in his Obi-Wan voice gave us what amounted to a preattack pep talk.

When we arrived at the Death Star we waited patiently for signs of activity before tossing a rock against the door. Nothing happened. We tossed another rock and still no reaction.

We looked at each other. The time had come for us to agree to a mutual chickening out. Scott turned to go. My brother looked at me, waiting for the green light to sprint the dark paths back home.

"Let's do it," I said. "Screw the Morons. They wrecked our fort."

John nodded in agreement and, as I rose to attack the fort, said in his grave Obi-Wan voice, "Now, Luke, now!"

And so I led the charge and the others followed, shoving at the surprisingly sturdy walls of the fort. The Morons, unlike most of us,

believed in nails. It took all of us to topple it and as we stood back marveling at our own bravery I heard the all too familiar sound of a pellet gun being pumped and primed.

Then I heard Richard cackle moments before Sharon streaked out of nowhere and chased us out of the woods and into the polo field.

Halfway across the field Sharon dashed after Scott as Richard leaped onto my back.

I snapped and without thinking fought back, clamping Richard in a headlock and twisting as hard as I could until I felt his body whip over and land with a thump on the ground. I was filled with some dark force as I squeezed him harder and harder. His glasses pinched off his face and broke. When I looked down he was crying and gasping for breath.

The force began to ebb and I loosened my grip and told him I was going to let him go and that he'd better not do anything. He blinked in agreement and so I released him.

He sprang to his feet, rubbing his throat and staring at me. Sharon and Lurch arrived on the scene, took one look at Richard's tear-streaked face, and shook their heads.

"You're gonna die, Reid," Richard said.

Lurch put a protective arm around Sharon and pointed the pellet gun at me. "Do something, Richie," Lurch said. "You'd better do something before I shoot him."

Richard lunged and again I caught him in a headlock and we went to the ground. He thrashed for a minute and tried to gouge my eyes as Sharon circled shouting, "Kill him, kill him."

But I had him and the louder she yelled the harder I squeezed until I could feel the fight go out of Richard. He went limp and looked up at me with pleading, fearful eyes.

I let him go again and stood, half expecting Lurch to pepper me with pellets or for Sharon to jump me. Richard stayed on the ground crying softly and clutching at his swollen throat. Lurch drew a bead on me and I stood there, staring him down until he lost his nerve and lowered the gun.

I turned and walked away as Sharon, in a rare moment of tenderness, actually helped her brother to his feet and found his broken glasses for him.

I didn't see Richard until several days later when he came by our rebuilt fort with Julius in tow. I didn't run and hide, even as Richard began to throw lit matches at me and taunt me. Instead I walked up to him and made a fist.

Julius backed away and Richard flinched.

"Get outta here," I said.

Richard mustered the last of his bravery and said, "What are you gonna do about it ya queer?"

"I'll kill you," I said.

And I meant it.



ANAKIN, GET YOUR GUN

JOE QUEENAN

From the very beginning of the *Star Wars* saga, the moviegoing public has engaged in an intellectually duplicitous relationship with Darth Vader and the Galactic Empire. On the one hand, Vader is widely viewed as one of the most satanic figures in the history of motion pictures, occupying the same vaunted position as Dracula, Freddy Krueger, Michael Corleone, and others of this ilk. On the other hand, much like Dracula, Freddy Krueger, and Michael Corleone, Vader is considered to be resourceful, energetic, resilient, and endowed with an unrivaled ability to get things done. Finally, just like Dracula, Freddy Krueger, and Michael Corleone, Vader is an extremely impressive, attention-getting dresser. A master of monochromatic menace in his jet-black, Astral Armani threads, Vader has perfected a look that is never out of place, no matter how formal the interstellar occasion.

Whatever else he may be criticized for, Vader is certainly not dull, which brings us back to my initial argument. As much as audiences fear Vader and ostensibly yearn for his destruction, there can be no denying that the least interesting sequences in the *Star Wars* movies are the ones that he is not in. Whenever the camera lingers

too long on Princess Leia, Luke Skywalker, Yoda, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Qui-Gon Jinn, Chewbacca, C-3PO, or the insufferable Jar Jar Binks, the story tends to get slack, mushy, or camp. Like Jack Palance in *Shane* or the great white shark in *Jaws*, Darth Vader is almost never seen on-screen, yet whenever he disappears for any length of time, the audiences that ostensibly dread his machinations cannot wait for him to come back and pep things up. If only because of his theme song.

In short, Darth Vader is the fulcrum, the focal point, the emotional epicenter of the *Star Wars* saga, as has become clear since the release of *The Phantom Menace*. Though phenomenally successful at the box office, *The Phantom Menace* is by far the least satisfying and least exciting of the *Star War* movies, and there is a simple reason why: Darth Vader isn't in it. What's more, it is now generally agreed by *Star Wars* aficionados that his able though short-lived successor, Darth Maul, is not in it nearly enough.

There is nothing unusual or disturbing about the public's mixed and perhaps even dishonest feelings toward a terrifying villain. By and large, villains, whether fictional or real, are more fascinating than their virtuous counterparts. (This is especially true if the villain is played by someone like Dennis Hopper or Alan Rickman and his nemesis is played by someone like Kevin Costner or Kyle MacLachlan. Or if the villain is a gigantic shark locked in mortal combat with Richard Dreyfuss.) This is the reason St. Augustine viewed acting as sinful, since it required decent human beings to impersonate evildoers, and conceivably be seduced by their power.

Nowhere is the allure of the classic villain more apparent than in the works of the Immortal Bard: Iago is more compelling than Othello, Richard III more fascinating a figure than Henry VII, Macbeth more commanding a presence than Macduff. Similarly, in real life, Geronimo is more riveting than the interchangeable white men who pursue him, Al Capone more captivating than Eliot Ness, Richard Nixon more electrifying than George McGovern. Since George Lucas relied heavily on such legendary archetypes in writing *Star Wars*, it is hardly surprising that Darth Vader should be

more interesting than his son, Luke Skywalker, or his daughter, Princess Leia. In her case, a *lot* more interesting. Leia is so dull and predictable it's hard to believe these two come from the same gene pool.

But in *Star Wars*, there is another important dynamic at work. Though many might deem this heresy, there can be no denying that the general public has consistently misunderstood the underlying theme of these films. Because of a childlike, gap-toothed, wide-eyed affection for the lovable man-child Luke Skywalker, the damsel-in-distress Princess Leia, the swashbuckling corsair Han Solo, and this unlikely trio's mongrel entourage of precocious druids, fey robots, and cuddly marsupials, the public has overlooked the real message of the *Star Wars* epic.

That message is this: It is the Empire, not the Rebel Alliance, that offers the best hope for the future of the race. It is the Empire, not the Rebel Alliance, that is best equipped to bring peace and prosperity to this troubled galaxy. It is the Empire, not the Rebel Alliance, that is on the cutting edge of technology. By resisting, subverting, and ultimately destroying the Empire, the rebels have bequeathed their children a chaotic, primitive, technologically retrograde society that will almost certainly collapse into anarchy within a generation. By lending their enthusiastic support to the rebels in this well-intentioned but self-destructive jihad, the public is indulging in an unprecedented level of hypocrisy. Cheering for the Rebel Alliance is like rooting for Paraguay against England, like rooting for Chad against Sweden. Worse, it is like rooting for Afghanistan against America.

In essence, I am presenting three cognate arguments here. First, I am making the nonearthshaking assertion that Darth Vader and his cohorts in the Empire are infinitely more charismatic—or to use the modern vernacular, *cooler*—than the rebels, and therefore worthy of a certain grudging admiration. Second, I am making the more controversial claim that the Empire (which because of its overall technical efficiency and unilateral nuclear dominance bears a strong resemblance to the United States of America) occupies

the moral high ground in the *Star Wars* saga. Third, I am issuing the admittedly incendiary declaration that by mistakenly rooting for the Rebel Alliance in *Star Wars*, moviegoers not only confuse good with evil, but also fail to see their own pellucid reflection in Darth Vader and the Empire. This is a situation that I hope to see corrected.

From the beginning of time, human evolution has been a painful, bloody process in which the old reluctantly gives way to the new. Men of the Ice Age resented the men of the Bronze Age with their newfangled weapons and attitudes; men of the Bronze Age despised the hotshots of the Iron Age, viewing their technological prowess as a sign of moral putrescence. Yet human life would not be what it is today were it not for the triumph of technologically advanced societies over primitive ones. Any effort to obstruct this progress, no matter how pure the motives of the saboteurs, frustrates the dialectical process of history and is bad for humanity.

Economists have known this for centuries. When news of George Armstrong Custer's epic miscalculation at the Battle of the Little Bighorn reached Karl Marx's ears in London, he found himself faced with a troubling conundrum. On the one hand, he was happy to see Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse pull off one of the great upsets in the history of Anglo-Indian warfare. On the other hand, the triumph of a Stone Age society over a modern society was bad for everyone, because it interrupted the march of progress, delaying the inevitable triumph of socialism over capitalism. And anything that delayed the arrival of the future—i.e., the past—was a bad thing. It is not merely Marx who believed this. Hegel, from whom Marx pilfered most of his great ideas, had the same opinion.

The same logic can be applied to *Star Wars*. Because they are so helpless, so innocent, so sweet, so peace-loving, so klutzy, the rebels inevitably beguile an unsuspecting public into supporting their cause. But once we get past their seductive Tinkerbelle qualities, it becomes obvious that the rebels stand for everything modern people despise. They are inefficient. They are disorganized. They

do not finish what they start. They are incapable of making quick decisions. They cannot keep their eyes on the prize. In fact, it is not going too far to say that they are complete and utter fuckups.

For starters, they are dinky. The first insurgents that we see in *A New Hope* are the slapdash droid R2-D2 and the prissy, fuddy-duddy robot C-3PO, a slightly less fey version of the gay butler who camped it up in Woody Allen's 1973 film *Sleeper*. This pair of electronic nerds look like hastily assembled props at a poorly attended Mensa Halloween bash. By comparison, the first villains that we see are the nattily attired Imperial Stormtroopers and the peerless fashion plate Darth Vader. The contrast is remarkable; from the very beginning, it is evident that we are dealing with a duel to the death between seasoned professionals and rank amateurs, between dapper sophisticates and third-rate clowns.

This dichotomy becomes steadily more apparent as the series continues. Unlike the villains, whose spiffy haberdashery is characterized by a decided thematic unity, the rebels have a raffish, thrift-shop look. Luke and his family dress in what is best described as southern California neo-biblical loungewear: bathrobes, sheaths, smocks, muumuus. Princess Leia is usually seen wearing sweatpants or worse. The rebel aviators cavort in orange jumpsuits that make them look like the dorks that roll out the tarp during rain delays at Shea Stadium. Yoda appears to be a slimy, nine-hundred-year-old amphibian prototype of Mickey Rooney. Chewbacca closely resembles an orangutan, and not an especially good-looking one. Even the refined, elegant Obi-Wan Kenobi has a foolish, retro getup, and could easily be mistaken for a Trappist monk deported to Deep Space for unspecified monastic offenses.

Things steadily deteriorate as the series wends its way toward the Empire's unfortunate demise. For example, in *Return of the Jedi*, when Luke and Leia visit the planet inhabited by the Ewoks, they wear ridiculous helmets that look like toilet seats with Rolodexes glued on top of them. Throughout the saga, the rebels turn up for battle wearing glorified pajamas or outfits they bought cheap at a Franciscan brothers garage sale, while the Empire's

suave, debonair operatives always come dressed to kill. The rebels simply have no sense of occasion.

The insurgents' hair is also a problem, and gets worse as the series unravels. Purists may argue that this was unavoidable, that with the passage of time, the anachronistic '70s hairstyles of the rebels would inevitably come to seem *démodé* and ridiculous, while the helmeted Darth Vader would never be subjected to the remorseless vicissitudes of fashion. I disagree. Whether we are talking about Luke's boyish bangs, Leia's girlish curls, Qui-Gon Jinn's Motley Crue locks, or the young Obi-Wan Kenobi's irksome pig-tail, the rebels always look like burned-out hippies in search of the Lost Bong. Their natural environment is not long ago and far away in a place called Alderaan. It's long ago and far way in a place called Haight-Ashbury.

Rebel ordinance and transport are also resolutely third rate. As if Luke's slapdash airborne go-cart were not tacky enough, Han Solo tools around the galaxy in a cheesy spaceship that rocks back and forth like a crummy old Mazda. When they need to go on patrol in Arctic climes, the rebels saddle up a hybrid creature that looks like a disastrous fusion between a camel and a yak. By comparison, the Imperial legions rely on a breathtaking fleet of state-of-the-art spacecraft, not the least of which is the Death Star. And once the original Death Star is destroyed, Vader and the Emperor, rather than sitting around pouting, build a fully operational replacement almost overnight. Love 'em or hate 'em, there's one thing you have to concede about this pair: *They take a licking, but keep on ticking.*

The fact of the matter is, the rebels are out-and-out Luddites, fecklessly resisting the Empire's bold technological breakthroughs at every turn. Tellingly, when the insurgents enter the *Götterdämmerung* phase of their struggle at the conclusion of *Return of the Jedi*, they are armed with slingshots, tree trunks, and feudal-era catapults owned and operated by a battalion of diminutive fur balls who look like Chewbacca's precocious nephews. And yet, it's worth remembering that had this hideously downscale uber-Wookiee not commandeered one of the Empire's cutting-edge All Terrain Scout Transports, the rebels would never have been able to

dismantle the Death Star's protective shield—and the entire Rebel fleet would have been destroyed. Proving that when you have a choice between an ax and an AK-47, go with the heaviest firepower every time.

Such basic efficiencies as just-in-time inventory are not among the Rebel Alliance's strong points. For example, *The Phantom Menace* takes forever to get going because the roving Jedi Knights Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan Kenobi cannot obtain spare parts for their vehicle and must hang around town until an eight-year-old boy wins a junior spaceship race and secures the parts they need. The Empire would have never put up with this nonsense. A Sith Lord would have simply told the parts distributor to fork over the merchandise or get sliced and diced by a lightsaber. Had Darth Vader or Darth Maul been on the job, the spaceship could have been repaired in three shakes of a cat's tail and the movie would have been fifty minutes shorter.

It is hardly surprising that *Star Wars* appeared in 1977, the year President Jimmy Carter took office, for the Rebel Alliance is a perfect metaphor for the Carter administration: a bunch of well-meaning, badly dressed rubes with terrible hair who simply could not do anything right. By contrast, the Empire closely resembles the dark forces of the Reagan administration, renowned for its ruthless efficiency. (It is also no accident that Ronald Reagan referred to his proposed antiballistic missile shield as "Star Wars," just as it has become increasingly clear over the years that the seemingly innocuous term "Trade Federation" is secretly a code word for "Republican.")

In the years since he was driven from office with his cracker tail between his legs, Carter has made strenuous efforts to rehabilitate his image, portraying himself as a selfless moral crusader who got blindsided by a reeling economy, soaring interest rates, and an unprecedented level of collusion among the assorted forces of evil. In fact, just like the Rebel Alliance, his administration was filled with incompetent ding-dongs who wrecked the American economy and ruined our image in the eyes of friends and foes alike.

The stunning similarities between the Rebel Alliance and the

Carter administration do not stop there. Just as the Carter White House was humiliated when a bunch of feisty Iranian students seized our embassy in Tehran, the Rebel Alliance (originally the Old Republic) gets humiliated when its leaders are deposed by the insurgent Trade Federation (with support from the fledgling Empire). The speed with which Princess Amidala is deposed and taken into custody provides incontrovertible proof that the Republic has crummy security, deficient intelligence, and is run by bozos. How could a self-respecting potentate allow herself to get run out of office by a bunch of glorified Space Teamsters? And what does it say about her military advisers that no one saw this coming?

Some may argue that in defending Darth Vader and the Empire I am being deliberately argumentative and mischaracterizing Lucas's real beliefs. Far from it. As the *Star Wars* epic works its way back to the beginning, it becomes evident that the youthful Vader had legitimate reasons for crossing over to the putatively "dark" side. Let us recall that when we first meet young Anakin Skywalker (Kid Darth) at the beginning of *The Phantom Menace*, he is a hard-working slave on the outlying planet of Tatooine. Indeed, his dream is to one day become a Jedi Knight so that he can free his fellow slaves. Yet it immediately becomes obvious that the existing Jedi Knights do not share his idealism, that in fact nobody in the Republic cares one way or the other about the plight of juvenile slaves on a far-flung planet.

"Can you help him?" asks Mrs. Skywalker when she confers with Qui-Gon Jinn, the mysterious interstellar Celt played by the dour Liam Neeson.

"I don't know," he replies. "I didn't actually come here to free slaves."

Well, thank you very much, Mr. Jedi Knight! Yes, it's precisely that kind of attitude that got the Republic in trouble in the first place. This is the point at which the Republic starts to resemble the Clinton administration: all talk, no action. Deplore slavery, but never make a serious effort to eliminate it. No wonder the Empire succeeds in overthrowing the Republic with such ease; who wants to be governed by phonies like this?

That's certainly the way Vader will ultimately come to look at things. Since the Jedi Knights make no effort to aid him and his enslaved mother until he helps them get the spare parts for their spaceship, it is easy to understand why he eventually develops such a terrible attitude. But that will come much later; at this point in his life he is still idealistic and pure. As he says to his mother, "Mom, you said the biggest problem in this universe is nobody helps each other." And helping people is what he sets out to do, even if his methods are occasionally harsh. But as the man once said, "If you want to make an omelet, you've got to break a few eggs." And break them he does. Like Napoleon Bonaparte, a brilliant warrior and revolutionary statesman whose innovations gave birth to the modern world but whose reputation has been unjustly besmirched by the cabal of reactionaries who ultimately prevailed against him, Vader is a man more sinned against than sinning, an unjustly maligned visionary whose daring new ideas could bring stability to a galaxy that badly needs it.

And I mean *badly*. By the time *Return of the Jedi* begins, it is clear that the entire galaxy is a mess, with lawless thugs like Jabba the Hutt disrupting the natural order. Only a strong central authority like the Empire can restore sanity to the universe. Which is why Vader holds out the hand of peace to his son: "With our combined strength, we can end this destructive conflict," he says to Luke during one of their confrontations. Admittedly, it's a bit tricky to hold out the hand of friendship to someone whose hand you have just cut off, but in not abusing his son further Vader manifests admirable restraint, leaving the door open for future negotiations.

The set-to between the Empire and the Rebel Alliance is a textbook example of what happens when a feudal society crosses swords with a modern one. Instead of accepting the inevitability of modernization, the feudal society becomes testy and sulks. Nobody wins in this situation. But this conflict also illustrates the psychological discord that plagues most modern people when faced with situations such as this. On the one hand, people living in the twenty-first century typically exhibit a knee-jerk sympathy for colorful aborigines with their primitive weapons, garish attire, and

unsophisticated economic systems. On the other hand, these same modernites secretly admire efficient, ruthless, well-dressed leaders with cutting-edge technology and terrific organizational skills.

At the beginning of this essay, I mentioned the intellectual duplicity of the American people in their relationship with Darth Vader. This has become increasingly true as we distance ourselves from the '60s, an era when corporate leaders were almost universally vilified. Since that time, the American people have developed a love affair with tough-as-nails, shoot-from-the-hip, can-do corporate honchos like Lee Iacocca, Donald Trump, and Chainsaw Al Dunlap. Vader (which rhymes with "raider") is the perfect embodiment of one of America's most beloved folk heroes, the take-no-prisoners corporate raider. With his ruthless demeanor and ability to make snap decisions, Darth Vader is a lot like Disney's Michael Eisner or General Electric's Jack Welch. Sometimes he even resembles Michael Milken. To men such as this, using the firepower of the Death Star to destroy an entire planet would never be construed as annihilation; they would merely describe it as a highly sophisticated form of *downsizing*. The rebels, by contrast, are soft and indecisive. They have trouble pulling the trigger. They have no single, charismatic leader; power is dispersed among a handful of people. This is a terrible organizational model.

One of the things Americans most admire about the Trumps and Welches is their ability to cut through the crap. Darth Vader shares this ability to dispense with the small talk and cut to the chase. And his message is never ambiguous. While the rebels tend to trade wisecracks or resort to New Age gobbledygook, Vader speaks in the clear, precise lingo of the seasoned Fortune 500 CEO. Consider the difference: Whenever Luke Skywalker appeals to his mentors for guidance they respond with enigmatic, impenetrable hooey about "the Force." The biggest problem with Kenobi and Yoda is that you can never get a straight answer out of them. "Stretch out with your feelings," is a typical Obi-Wan Kenobism. As if anyone could possibly figure out what *that* means. And Yoda, with his syntactically ravaged sentences, is even worse. You would

have thought that in nine hundred years of being a Jedi Master he might have taken a few months off to learn that the noun goes before the verb, that sentences like "Help you I will" are ungrammatical. But no.

By contrast, Imperial speech is always terse, direct, nonelliptical. Consider this classic exchange between Vader and one of his subordinates:

ADMIRAL: "Our ships have sighted the *Millennium Falcon*, Lord. But it has entered an asteroid field, and we cannot risk . . .

VADER: "Asteroids do not concern me, Admiral. I want that ship—not excuses."

ADMIRAL: "Yes, Lord."

Here we have the watertight, nonsense-free speech of the seasoned CEO. Get the job done, ass face. And spare me the goddamn details.

"He will join us or die, master," says Darth Vader when the Emperor demands how his efforts to recruit Luke are progressing. Here, Vader sounds like Bill Gates at the top of his game. Sure, Apple Computer devotees can make fun of Microsoft by referring to it as the Evil Empire. Well, who cares? Unlike Apple, which was determined to sell high-priced computers to a magic circle of geeks who thought they were better than everyone else, Microsoft set out to sell inexpensive, standardized systems to anyone who wanted them. Like Vader, Gates was determined to bring order to a fragmented universe. This is anathema to Apple enthusiasts; like the rebels, they prefer an anachronistic, anarchic, nonauthoritarian system.

Well, look where it got Steve Jobs.

Namby-pamby believers in the Rebel cause both loathe and dread the blunt Imperial style of speech. It unnerves them when the Emperor says things like: "Use your aggressive feelings, boy. Let the heat flow through you." But the Emperor is right. Why shouldn't we let the heat flow through us? It's ridiculous to pretend that

there is anything morally wrong with this philosophy. It is the philosophy of George S. Patton. It is the philosophy of William Tecumseh Sherman. It is the philosophy of Michael Jordan. It is a philosophy that has stood this great Republic in good stead for these many years. This wonderful nation was founded on the principle of using your aggressive feelings and letting the heat flow through you. The last person to not use his aggressive feelings and let the heat flow through him was Mahatma Gandhi. Look where it got him.

One of the things that makes Darth Vader so admirable is that he does not wear out his welcome. Film buffs generally agree that Francis Ford Coppola made a colossal mistake when he went back and shot *Godfather III*, that by the time Mario Puzo's Italian-American *Fall of the House of Atreus* had run its course, the depraved Michael Corleone had lost his edge. Much the same can be said of Pacino's despicable character in *Scarface*, where, by the end of the three-hour film, his bag of tricks has been emptied and the audience is happy to see the back of him. The *Friday the 13th*, *Halloween*, and *Nightmare on Elm Street* series also fall prey to the battle-fatigue syndrome; after a while the audience simply loses interest in the latest depredations of Michael, Jason, and Freddy and would prefer to see them die. Like any guest who has overstayed his visit, they deserve to be put to the sword.

Vader, by contrast, never loses that special something. He never surrenders that ineffable star quality that makes him so unique. He never becomes a caricature of himself. And he never descends into camp. That's why the audience is always glad to have him back. Other directors can learn much from this series—even the great ones. Let's face it, Steven Spielberg made a big mistake when he killed off the shark at the end of *Jaws*; in the three sequels, its substandard replacements were never equal to the task. George Lucas did not make the same mistake with Vader.

At this point, I would like to devote a few minutes to the subject of *image*. Foreigners looking at Americans invariably assume that the only thing we care about is money. Close, but no cigar.

While it is true that Americans care more about money than any people in the history of mankind, the one thing they care about even more is being perceived as *cool*. Americans have a pathological fear of being viewed as bad dressers or owning records that have fallen out of fashion or using outdated terminology in conversations with peers. Such gaucheries fall under the general rubric of *lameness*. This is another reason why I find the public's alleged affection for the Rebels so implausible. Look at the way they dress. More tellingly, look at the way they talk.

"I don't know where you get your delusions, laser brain," Princess Leia sneers at Han Solo at one juncture. When he responds with one of his typically inane comebacks, Leia ripostes: "Why, you stuck-up, half-witted, scruffy-looking Nerf Herder."

Why, you stuck-up, half-witted, scruffy-looking Nerf Herder?

Like I said: lame.

In filing this admittedly controversial *amicus curiae* brief on behalf of the Empire, I am not suggesting that Darth Vader and the Emperor are entirely flawless, or that they make untrammelled, unblemished role models for the youth of today. Far from it. Both men have rough edges and could profit from a long weekend at the local Charm School. Vader has a bit of the bully in him and can get chippy when riled, and the Emperor does not interface well with subordinates. But as leaders and managers, this pair are peerless. And when they fail, the blame cannot be laid at their doorsteps.

Indeed, it is ironic that throughout the *Star Wars* cycle, the "villains" rely on brains, cunning, and superior technology, while the "heroes" rely on luck and the occasional electrodynamic intercession of a mysterious dead man with a Japanese name and an English accent. Vader, by contrast, is a brilliant tactician whose strategy is ultimately foiled not because it is ill conceived, nor because of personal failings on his part, but because of bad luck and the incompetence of a few underlings. It's the same old story: *You can't get good help anywhere.*

Most historians agree that the worst event in the history of mankind was the collapse of the Roman Empire because it created

a vacuum of power in central Europe that persists to this day. Machiavelli, devil's advocate for the Medicis, understood this and so does George Lucas. He understands that a rough, tough central authority, whatever its shortcomings, is infinitely superior to a rulerless, passive confederacy, that more people will be happy under an efficient authoritarian regime they fear than under a passive, incompetent regime they love. Yet for a quarter century now, the public has completely missed the point of this remarkable series of films. Foolishly, they assume that the message at the end of *Return of the Jedi* is that primitive societies are superior to modern ones. From our own life experiences, we know this is not the case. This is the sort of thing that people believed back in the turn-down-your-thermostats-and-die Jimmy Carter Era. What the Rebel Alliance represents is the fractured dream of the '60s, a phantasmagoric, free-floating society with minimal police presence, an informal political structure, and a deliberately inert economy.

The Ewoks' victory dance at the end of *Return of the Jedi* gives us a pretty good idea of where this galaxy is headed. Yes, the victorious Ewoks are undeniably cute. But a society built upon cuteness cannot long survive. Look at Camelot. Or Holland. The peppy, bouncy Ewoks theme song sounds like that reprehensible Up With People! music they used to play at Super Bowl halftime shows. As the furry creatures cavort merrily, Lucas is giving us ■ clear idea of what lies ahead for citizens of the galaxy. Chaos. Which brings to mind something Obi-Wan Kenobi once said to Luke all the way back in the very first film. "Who is the greater fool?" wondered Obi, philosophically. "The fool, or the fool that follows him?"

Only Yoda could answer that one.

Clue got haven't a I.



BECOMING DARTH VADER

LYDIA MILLET

The year of *Star Wars* I was eight. It may have been the year I worshiped my classmate Pam, who wore train tracks on her teeth and large, round glasses with peach-colored plastic frames. I had neither braces nor glasses then but I believed that if I had both I might also have a chance of recapturing, in my own lesser person, the magic that was Pam. My own large front teeth were unrestrained by orthodontics and therefore crossed over each other to create an impression I will call "chortling rabbit." I spoke loudly and laughed often, producing a sound that my mother implied, with a measure of disapproval, resembled the honking bray of a donkey.

Rabbits, donkeys; I was approachable and familiar, the opposite of lovely and serene. I wanted to be liked by everyone. Pam, on the other hand, had a placid, laid-back demeanor. She rarely seemed eager to please. She had her own pantheon, of course, her own personal altar of proud and lofty figures, chief among them, at that time, Farrah Fawcett. Although my long-term memory is poor, I remember clearly one of Pam's shirts, which was white with red and orange horizontal stripes. It was cotton and had a hood that hung down her back; the drawstring at the collar was red to match

the stripes. Come to think of it, the shirt I remember so clearly may have been my shirt, bought to emulate one of Pam's shirts. My mother says I used to come home from school in tears, sobbing the ragged-voiced refrain *Pam hates me. Pam hates me*. There were days, apparently, when that was all I said.

But it may not have been that year. It may have been the year when dimpled Anka from Romania and I went behind the green wooden shed in the copse beside the school to kiss boys. We were entrepreneurs. For each kiss we demanded as payment either a candy necklace or a handful of gum, which to me was contraband since my father—who at that time, I believe, may have smoked a meerschaum pipe—had outlawed gum-chewing in the house. Or maybe it was the year when I took a swing at Cary, the redheaded boy who I seem to recall was already planning, in fifth grade, to be an architect when he grew up. I hit Cary, thinking I was the boss of him and possibly even swaggering away with a boastful air. Not much later he sauntered up to me on the street and swiftly punched me in the stomach. I ran home crying.

I think I was a crybaby.

Or then it also may have been the year I won the long jump, or the year I slipped on the track running the 400 and filled my right knee with deep grooves of black gravel, which it still carries. It may have been the year when Cary and his cronies, with nary a care for cliché, actually did put earthworms in my hair, causing me to emit piercing shrieks. We had what they called a *healthy antagonism*, Cary and I. It may even have been the year when, at a Brownies meeting—within our Brownies hierarchy there were various bands of fairies, and in my time I had been leader of both the red-and-yellow Kelpies and the emerald green Pixies—I was discovered to be harboring head lice. My mother, a practical, cautious person not given to frivolous embellishment, insists to this day that the lice were the size of cockroaches. The way she tells it they were running around in circles on the top of my head like prize fillies at the Kentucky Derby.

Whether all of these were in fact just one year, and whether

that was the year of *Star Wars*, is lost to me forever. At some point my brother got a lightsaber, I know that much. In previous years, for Halloween, he had been a pirate named Don Dirk of Dowdee, with a plume in his cap. I had always been a fairy-princess-queen, a triple whammy of bet-hedging. Should some insufficiently humble unbeliever say, glancing at the delicate silver-and-gold crown my father had fashioned for me out of a mesh of pipe cleaners and bulbous Christmas ornaments, *What are you? A princess?* implying, I knew even then, *a rank pretender to the throne?* I could wave my scepter and scoff: *Not just a princess. Also a queen.* For obvious reasons, I could not be only a queen; queens were old, and often ugly.

Should the same arrogant unbeliever further say, *Oh, you're just a princess-queen?* I could point to my wings, made of white nylons decorated with glued-on glitter and stretched over artfully molded clothes hangers, and say, *I am, in addition, a fairy.* I ruled over the land and sea, but when the chips were down I could also turn you into a toad. I was a spiritual as well as a secular leader. Let mortals beware.

There we were, Josh a pirate, me a fairy-princess-queen, and my little sister Mandy the Frankenstein monster. And then the loud starry darkness in the theater, the action figures, the lightsabers, and Josh went from pirate to Luke Skywalker. He would go swashbuckling around the house sowing the seeds of fear. The lightsaber wavered and sliced, warbled and swooped precariously near table-tops and shelves, a threat to trinkets everywhere. I wish, for the sake of narrative, that I could say it was the lightsaber that struck my sister in the eye, prompting a panicked run to the Hospital for Sick Children in the family Toyota. In fact it was a plastic medieval sword that Josh wielded while encased in his plastic knight's armor, a menacing combination. Half-blinded by the visor of the helmet, he would stagger around stabbing at the air with a poignant desperation. My sister paid the price.

(She was not permanently maimed, though; of the three of us, as I write this, she is the only one who still has 20/20 vision.)

* * *

I was bored by the lightsabers, being a girl, even though, as a girl, I was also a tomboy, skinny, dirty, stringy-haired. I was the kind of tomboy who threw tantrums when she didn't win. (As a result she often won.) This was the lesson learned: You can try to strong-arm them, as I did with Cary, and that may be effective as a temporary measure, a brutish demonstration of force. But then what happens is they walk up to you later, when you've grown lazy and complacent, and cave in your stomach with a fist. Or you can *whine* them into submission, a tack taken by many a desperate wife over the centuries. There's the iron fist and there's the velvet whine, with its sinister, deadening stamina. The superior efficacy of the whine, over the long term, has yet to be understood by U.S. foreign-policy makers.

I was bored by the lightsabers then and I am bored by them now, after a quarter century. Watching the movies as an adult, the lightsaber fights were the only parts through which I fast-forwarded. I like my symbolism more covert.

As a prepubescent it was easy to identify with Princess Leia, so obviously virginal, so obviously disinterested, and always being saved. Object not subject, she was saved right and left; though she did occasionally fire off a gun, she never did much saving herself. She did, however, remain calm. No girlish squeals for Princess Leia. Earthworms would have presented no challenge to her composure. She was a better, more seamless tomboy than I was but still, of course, only ornamental, window dressing in the shining world of the heroes.

It was easy to remain Princess Leia across and beyond the years spanned by *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*. I went from tomboy to jock and gone were childish things like dress-up, potions, and singing *The Sound of Music*; almost overnight the looseness of play vanished and the strictures of competition took

its place, the channeled rigor of performance. My high school was determined to make children into pillars of the establishment, determined first and foremost to instill in children the unswerving conviction that they were *born to lead*. In its defense, it taught Latin and Greek and *Beowulf* and Chaucer in Middle English, and there were teachers there, some of them gentle fossils, others eager newcomers, who honestly believed they could instill a *passion for learning* and who, in so believing, themselves became romantics and were loved.

This was when we first grew familiar with nonfood brand names, when clothing was identified with manufacturers, and video games and portable technologies began their triumphant emergence into the mass market and were instantly known by their trademarks, Sony Walkman, JVC, Pac-Man. Now it happens much earlier, needless to say; infants formulate their first phrases to include the words *Sega* and *Microsoft*, but the early '80s were only the first glimmer of dawn in the era of personal electronics and universal branding.

Still, despite being told I had been born to lead, which meant, chiefly, growing up to be a banker, a lawyer, or a captain of industry, I remembered what I had learned: there is safety in distance, safety in remove. While it was true that, as a fairy-princess-queen, I had been a world leader, it had always been an inherited title. Striving for such a position was out of the question. A royal is not a politician. I was perfect and unimpaired as an observer; I left it to the imperfect, the frantic, the boisterous to do the hard, messy work of empire-building.

One speaks with unchallenged authority only about oneself. This is why so many writers, seeking authority, write only about familiar things; it is why, contrary to popular opinion, the bravest writers are those who take as their subject matter that about which they know almost nothing. It is why I, in writing about *Star Wars*, actually write only about myself, why, in fact, I, like many who attempt

the so-called personal essay, seize upon any outside stimulus as *carte blanche* to expose myself to all and sundry, naked, writhing, and frankly none too clean. Clearly the personal essay is an ideal venue for the airing of dirty laundry, the foisting of self-indulgent reminiscences upon an unsuspecting, innocent readership. In writing a personal essay I remind myself of a cat, proudly depositing at its owner's feet a small, pink baby mouse with no head.

If we were not all voyeurs at heart the personal essay would have no home. But luckily our culture's love of stories is firmly entrenched, and any love of stories is a love of voyeurism, since to read a story is automatically to become a voyeur, to savor the act of seeing from a secret place. If we could, we would watch the *whole lives* of strangers bundled into two hours—that is, those parts of their lives that would fill us with a mad compulsion to express ourselves, be fulfilled, and seek glory, not those parts that would send us back to bed whimpering.

Quite often when I leave a multiplex after seeing a movie I have the distinct sensation it has taught me nothing I did not already know, shown me nothing I could not have imagined for myself, but has exhorted me, mostly through its soundtrack and cinematography, to *express yourself, be fulfilled, and seek glory*. By contrast, I seldom leave a multiplex thinking I have been encouraged to *contemplate, empathize, and share all you have*. It's apparent that Hollywood has given itself the job—rhetorical, propagandistic, full of ecstasy—of pressing all citizens into the service of advancement. It is not certain what kind of advancement is generally being urged upon us, (the specifics are vague) but I'd hazard a guess it's something in the American Dream family: self-love, self-improvement, the massive personal accumulation of wealth.

Sometimes it's simpler: I leave the theater with the heartfelt conviction that I should be better groomed.

But it's noteworthy that *Star Wars*—with its childish yet prophetic vision of smart-aleck boy wonders, monsters both cuddly and ugly but always integrated into daily life, and everlasting, intergalactic human-race diaspora—emerged at a moment in the

late '70s when Hollywood had, for a time, been turning away from exaltation, setting itself a grittier, more realistic task. Its ebullience subdued by the cultural disillusionments of Vietnam and Watergate, Hollywood was suffering from a sort of erectile dysfunction of the urge to propagandize, and as a result producing subtle and exceptional art on film. For the most part, the actors of the '70s were less immaculate than those of decades before or since; the heroes were less superhuman, the villains less subhuman, the soundtracks less hysterical with grandeur, and the cumulative effect certainly less self-congratulatory and patriotic. (Outer space, as a setting for movies, attracts the most grandiose soundtracks—*Thus Spake Zarathustra*, for example—which is natural since it is, of course, both the final frontier and a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away. Outer space gets to be both ancient history, lost in the boundless void of the universe, and the prophetic vision of a future of infinite dispersal: tiny we roam across the sands, ten million light-years hence.) So *Star Wars* came, both through and despite its intended message about virtuous small rebellions, to tell both '70s Hollywood and the viewing public: *No. Let there be an end to this foolishness.*

This is no way to prop up an empire.

That the world of *Star Wars* was also a prepubescent world, where the heroes were clean, earnest, and sexless, and the truths about good and evil simple, made it the perfect propaganda for all ages. In the far distant past and the far distant future, good American boys with mom-and-pop values, gay English butler robots for companions, and apes for copilots will save the universe from merciless domination by ruthless, impersonal forces. There is hope yet, my friends, for despite what you see outside these cinema walls, in the far distant past and in the far distant future we, you, I, all of us, will save America from itself.

Darth Vader, dark Vater, dark father, unmistakably, was the most erotic figure in the *Star Wars* family and the only tragic one, and because of this he had a terrible beauty.

To state the obvious about Vader, he was a faceless man behind

a ferocious black mask, protected by his anonymity. Endlessly a cipher, endlessly an intrigue, he was the only question *Star Wars* posed to its audience, the only mystery presented. We might imagine behind the mask the face of Hitler, the face of a monster, the face of a machine, a skull with gaping eye sockets, or far, far more, something horrifying and primeval, beyond words as well as beyond sight, unspeakable. There was no end to what we could imagine, and for that reason the mask was, needless to say, far more compelling than anything that could ever be behind it, as is the way with masks. And, arguably on a more mundane level, Vader was also the ultimate sellout: possessed of all the powers of the Force, holding the key to enlightenment itself, he chose to use his genius for evil. He was, among other things, a lampoon of Adam Smithian enlightened self-interest: in a preview of '80s ideology, he made selling out look sexy. At the helm of the expansionist Empire, he was untrammelled id, an embodiment of lust for power and for domination.

But Vader also seemed absurdly trapped in his throatbox and his cloak of gloom. He prowled around self-consciously, almost, it seemed, wearing his mask in public shame, or wearing his shame in the form of a mask. It was as though he was too discreet to show himself, perhaps out of simple reluctance to inspire repulsion. And, as many suspected and as was finally confirmed, all he was really hiding was a maimed face. I always had an inkling, watching him stride around in glum determination, that Vader wore the mask because he was vain, and chose to inspire fear rather than repel desire. Alternately, I speculated, maybe his face was not awe-inspiring at all. Maybe it was just a plain face with a flattened nose, a weak chin, and rabbit teeth. Maybe Vader needed the mask because without it he was just a man you passed casually on the street.

Lord Vader was an aristocrat, and as such he had poise, elegance, and good manners. Even when inflicting the death grip he was calm and composed. He kept his counsel; a man of few words, he chose them carefully, played his cards close to his chest. His mystique was dependent upon it. A voluble Vader could not have

commanded the Empire; a chatty Vader would not have caused military men to quake in their boots. There are those who can smile and smile and be a villain, but Vader was not one of them. His power was the power of silence.

But silence does not come easily to all of us. For me there is only one answer to all social problems and irritants: nervous, trapped, irritated, or bored, I talk. In addition, thrilled, overjoyed, pleasantly content among friends, I talk. Confused, ambivalent, hesitant, agitated, I talk; I also talk when scared, angry, hurt, anxious, impatient, restless, morose, despondent, smug, curious, contemplative, playful—in a word, awake. When the back-and-forth of talk is good, I listen, too, of course, and when the talk is shallow or predictable I float, registering the words and idly foreseeing a response but not listening deeply, thinking not about the past but about the future: what will be said next, how it should be said, and more often what will likely not be said, whether the difficult things to say and to hear should be said and by whom, and what should never be said at all. Sometimes the daydreams of conversation are not as relevant as this, and talk produces a landscape far away, a landscape shimmering with the fragments of words, the suggestions of words, the memory of words gone by.

It seems to me sometimes that I am surrounded by Vaders. The Vaders are the ones who do not wear their hearts on their sleeves, who protect themselves from exposure. They do not display themselves in all their weakness to disarm would-be detractors, adopt a deceptively submissive pose to fool fearsome opponents. They do not broadcast their flaws, do not reach out to others by seeking and embracing a communion of weakness, of understandable frailty. (Many is the friend I have made this way, when we saw, in the turn of an instant, talking, that we knew each other best not through our successes but through our failures and our wry awareness of them.) Vaders do not make inappropriate remarks at dinner parties, let down their guard in drunken moments to reveal the wanting soul within. The Vaders are too smart for that, and they know which side their bread is buttered on.

The Vaders know about masks. They use them well.
And of course, the strongest of the Vaders rule the world.

If what is sought first and foremost is empathy, it is hard to be Vader. A Vader must seek, before love and often to the exclusion of love, authority. A Vader is a formalist, who must be persuasive not in content but in form: he doesn't have to persuade you he's correct in a matter, but he does have to persuade you to act as though he is. Might does make right, in fact, insofar as end effects are concerned, and this is something Vader knows. Quibbling over details is for children; ethics themselves are for children, an elaborate game played by the powerless. The powerful have little use for morality except as it applies to their lackeys, and possibly as a pet aesthetic, a pretty and self-legitimizing idea of rectitude; hence, as cynics know so well, the social compact of the law restricts the actions of all of us except those who are, neatly, beyond it.

Vader has an erotic charge just because he gets what he wants. Others may protest that when they think of *Star Wars* and *sexy* they think of young Harrison Ford, who as Han Solo played the part of a Harlequin romance hero, a rough-talking mercenary who treats our heroine Leia with gruff, arrogant disrespect before revealing, at the eleventh hour, a heart of gold beneath the leathery macho facade. But for me, the Han Solos of the entertainment world are old hat. In the first place they're predictable; in the second, they want nothing, finally, but a good obedient girl for a wife. Sassy back talk is only an aphrodisiac.

Vader, on the other hand, does not have any transparent desires, except, one assumes, ruthlessly to command, judge, and punish. Vader is opaque save for his menace, his propensity for killing underachievers on the spot and destroying whole planets by remote control. If it weren't for his genocidal tendencies Vader would be a laughing matter, and admittedly I don't really personally believe he blew up that whole planet.

And the silent man breaks our hearts as he dies, as we watch him—bound up in the tragedy of his own silence—leave a world

that, after all, barely even knew him. Remember the poignancy of Vader as he lay dying, having sacrificed himself for his son, finally exposed as a father, a human, a mortal, his now horrible but once handsome face ravaged and half eaten up by machine. For Vader, exposure could only mean death.

At a certain point in my twenties I began to wonder if it was possible to be relentlessly exposed and still command respect. I saw how some of the women and men I encountered would hold themselves in check, how they, unlike me, would not tell *everyone* *everything* about themselves at their earliest convenience. These people were cagey about their desires and their foibles, with whole libraries of secrets and aces up their sleeves. Instead of riotous storytelling and rushes of disclosure, they had a style that was deliberate and reserved; they designed the way they presented themselves to others, carefully doling out tidbits of self over time like so much Pez from a collectible dispenser. Their masks were well wrought. And these people could not be taken for granted. As friends or as acquaintances, they were islands in a chilling sea whose treacherous shoals had to be navigated with care. Intriguing but untouchable, they could be seen and heard but not felt or known; they were perennial strangers with whom one could fall in love again and again but never be intimate. And they tended to be people whose names, in their professional lives, had about them an aura of the sacrosanct, inspiring awe, trepidation, and sometimes seven-figure movie deals.

And also at a certain point it became clear to me that there are no meritocracies in the world; that in the arena of cultural production, as in any industry, power goes very simply to those who demand it.

When I realized that—an easy lesson for many, but apparently a difficult one for me, raised by loving parents and sheltered from threats both large and small—I came to understand that I was not a contender in the action-packed galaxy. I had carved out for myself a comfortable and ultimately passive niche. Although I did not

resemble a princess in any particular, did not live like a princess, had no poise or austerity, no subjects, no servants, and no white gown, I was still a princess wannabe: I watched from a point outside the field, waiting eternally for the true games to begin, waiting to ascend a private and, of course, imaginary throne.

It is no simple task to become Darth Vader. For one thing, what happens to the people who knew you before you wore the mask? How do you face them in your newly forbidding garb? It takes years to build a house of friends, a house of kindness, warmth, familiar sympathy. If you become Darth Vader overnight, does the house stay well lit, its welcoming rooms suddenly rendered alien by the presence of a prowling and enigmatic host? Surely the friends will laugh when you don the black facepiece, when you begin to hold yourself aloof and wander, cloaked in darkness, up and down the house's shadowy corridors.


Or you can transform yourself slowly into Vader, acquiring, bit by bit, the habits and accoutrements of mastery and distance. First the cloak, then the boots, next the gloves and lightsaber, and finally the helmet; first the pregnant pauses, then the brevity of speech, and finally the heavy breathing. This way your friends will have time to adjust to the metamorphosis, and though increasingly uneasy, even alarmed or outright frightened, they may not resort to ridicule. You will inspire distaste, you will receive referrals to mental-health professionals, the house may grow quiet and dim, with dust along the tabletops and sofas, but the laughter that comes of shock at the absurd will probably be absent.

Some of us, it would seem, are unable to bring ourselves to cultivate distant mystique. Some of us, in the end, hold our friends dearer than cloaks and daggers, hold the houses we live in closer than the sprawling and holy temples we might like to build; some of us stay forever on the brink of being Darth Vader, dreaming of

the power we might, in some other galaxy, command, but finally, perpetually, forlornly abdicate. Some of us wait eternally for that moment when, inspired by rage or desperation or pride, we will emerge from ourselves like butterflies from cocoons, our colors lit brightly for all to behold in the radiant space of the air. We wait to become something we have never been; we wait, like almost everyone else, for a sudden and redeeming grace.

And then, needless to say, there is the question, *Why?* Why is it desirable to be Darth Vader instead of a quiet watcher from the balcony or the cheap seats? Are weakness and fear of anonymity at the bottom of it all, at the base of every struggle for power and renown? Or can a poignant idealism light the sacred fire of ego, as Hollywood and free-market capitalism often wish to tell us, and somehow propel us flailing into the realm of greater good? Is the will to leave an imprint on the universe always a shallow and selfish will?

About a mile from my house in the Arizona desert, on the other side of a straight, fast, two-lane road that rushes with eighteen-wheelers and jacked-up pickups decorated with shotgun racks, there is a towering mound of petroglyphs, pictures of suns and antelope etched on stone by natives now gone for many hundreds of years. When I see them I do not think of the will to power, the clinging, striving, individual soul that wants to promote itself beyond its fellows. When I think of the desire to make markings on rocks that will outlast us all, I think of solitude and sadness; I think of those who have gone before and those who will follow us. I think of a soft finger touching a rough stone, and the stunning light of a star I can see in the night sky, a star that died thousands of human lifetimes ago.



IT'S A WONDERFUL LIFE DAY, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the *Star Wars Holiday Special*

WEBSTER YOUNCE

I don't remember when I first heard about the existence of the "lost" *Star Wars Holiday Special*, but some surreptitious whisper, some furtive murmur, or sotto voce allusion must have initially brought it to my attention. I do remember that rumors floated among my friends of a television extravaganza, featuring all the stars of the original movie, which was broadcast in the fall of 1978 and never aired again. Unfortunately, though, no one I knew had actually seen the thing, though some had vague recollections of its original broadcast and others were certain that bootleg copies of it existed. But I couldn't really confirm anything about it, and so like all things rooted in supposition and innuendo, the *Special* eventually assumed a talismanic status in my imagination. It became something like the medieval philosopher's stone or the fountain of youth, a shimmering, chimerical objective, forever just out of reach, into which I poured great hope, inordinate expectation, and an irrational amount of psychic energy. The entire matter seemed to be shrouded in mystery, including the explanation for the *Special's* disappearance. I gave no credence whatsoever to the most oft-cited reason, which held that the *Special* was so awful, so horrific a debacle, that George Lucas had banned it from the airwaves,

refused to acknowledge its existence, and would under no circumstances allow it to be released on video. This seemed highly unlikely to me. It wasn't that I was convinced that Lucas was incapable of producing a cinematic embarrassment; after all, I had seen *Howard the Duck*. Moreover, Lucas seemed perfectly at ease with the video release of two other infamous television spin-offs, the stupendously bad *An Ewok Adventure* and the execrable *Ewoks: The Battle for Endor*. The very fact that these three calamities blithely remained available to anyone with the poor judgment to seek them out seemed evidence enough that there was another explanation for the air of mystery that Lucas had draped around the *Special*—assuming, of course, that the show ever existed. After all, I had only heard rumors of it, usually along the lines of the “my cousin's roommate's best friend saw a copy at a party.” So I was left with little more than conjecture and surmise, both of the show's actuality and of its putative suppression. What I knew beyond a shadow of doubt, though, was that if the show did exist, the likelihood that I would ever actually see it was virtually nil.

As I say, the *Special* had come to occupy a rarefied, near-mythic status in my imagination, and I knew from extensive childhood fantasy reading that the surest way to prevent any hoped-for event from occurring was to expect it. At a more rational level, it seemed perfectly clear that if Lucas himself did not want the *Special* to surface, the only way I would ever discover the truth about it would involve some kind of dark ops mission, a cloak-and-dagger scenario involving a succession of anonymous phone calls, dead-letter drops, and coded messages culminating in a midnight rendezvous in a parking garage with a scratchy-voiced figure in a trench coat who, in the process of sliding a brown-paper package toward me from the shadows, would gravely inform me that many Bothans had died to bring me this information.

Reality, however, turned out to be far more inexplicable. In the mid-1990s I moved to a new city and into an apartment with a roommate who, I discovered one afternoon while rifling through

his belongings, had a bootleg copy of the *Special* crammed in his video collection amid his collection of Japanese *anime* and several episodes of *Friends*. Bathetic shelving aside, the knowledge that the *Special* was in my apartment had a weirdly chilling effect. I simply couldn't bring myself to watch it. I had visions of loading the tape into the VCR as the apartment door burst open and smoke billowed into the room. In would pour a legion of white-helmet-and-codpiece-wearing soldiers who would take me to a secluded room, strap me to a mechanical gurney, and slowly lower me toward an evil-looking, multiple-needle contraption while demanding I reveal the whereabouts of a man named Solo. (My paranoia may, in fact, be congenital. I have a brother who for years slept with a heavy, three-foot-long iron pipe in his bed to defend himself against attack from the Black Riders of Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* saga. Then again we did live in Mississippi, an exceedingly strange and mythic part of the world where people speak in archaic locutions and where hairy feet are not uncommon. A confusion of the state with Middle Earth is not as odd as it might initially appear.) Eventually, though, my curiosity got the better of me. I double locked and chained the apartment door, closed the blinds, turned off the ringer on my phone, and sat down to watch the show. If only I had heeded my fears.

The *Star Wars Holiday Special* is the most excruciatingly bad piece of television ever to air on that vast wasteland. And in saying so, I am at risk of understatement. The *Special* is worse than any description of it can possibly convey; as with stories of war, famine, or pestilence, language fails. But standing in the grand tradition of those who bear witness, I will relate (briefly, for pity's sake) what came across the airwaves that Day of Infamy, November 18, 1978. The story line, such as it is, is relatively straightforward. On the Wookiee planet of Kashyyyk, Chewbacca's nuclear family anxiously awaits his return for the family observance of Life Day, the Wookiee holiday reserved for the celebration of, well, Life. Or

something, since the arcana surrounding the holiday is never actually explained. The Aristotelian complication in this high drama is an Imperial blockade in place around Kashyyyk. Han Solo and Chewie are late, much to the dismay and distress of Chewbacca's wife, Malla, his father, Itchy, and his son, Lumpy. (Yes, Itchy and Lumpy.) And so the family waits, killing time in ways that would drive Beckett's Didi and Gogo to suicide. So what exactly transpires during this absurdist tragicomedy? A '70s-era variety show.

Seeking to allay her fears about her husband, Malla contacts, via a secret video communicator, a cosmetic-slathered Luke Skywalker (you hope this is a consequence of Mark Hamill's notorious 1977 automobile accident), and an apparently heavily medicated Princess Leia (of course, Carrie Fisher's own writings make superfluous any conjecture about her appearance). Both Luke and Leia assure Malla that Chewbacca will make it home safely, a belief seconded by a local trader named Saundan, played by Art Carney in the first of many "special guest star" appearances, who arrives bearing Life Day gifts. Saundan is responsible for the creepiest part of the *Special*, a segment that makes you wonder what happened to the network's Standards and Practices department. If there was one thing that you would expect to raise an objection from the censors, it would be Wookiee porn.

Saundan tells Itchy that he's brought the pater familia a "proton pack" for the "mind evaporator," a term that at this point in the *Special* made me wonder if I had become snarled in a cleverly contrived Möbius strip of self-referentiality. But alas, the capacity for irony has yet to evolve on Kashyyyk, which one should recall existed a long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. Itchy settles himself in the mind evaporator, which resembles a Barcalounger with attached helmet and visor, as Saundan inserts the proton pack. A swirl of vintage '70s disco lights swims across the screen as a woman's husky voice begins speaking urgently: "I know you're searching for me. Searching, searching. . . . I exist for you alone. I am in your mind as you create me. Oh, yes . . . I can feel my creation. . . . I'm getting your message. Are you getting mine?" Itchy

certainly is, emitting a sound somewhere between ■ moan and a growl. Slowly a woman with pink strands of hair comes into focus. I regret to report that it is Diahann Carroll. "Oh, oh. . . . We *are* excited, aren't we? Well, just relax. Just relax. . . . You see, I am your fantasy. I am your experience. So experience me. I am your pleasure. Enjoy me." This continues for far, far too long, Itchy moaning on cue, until some perfunctory disco-space music begins, and Ms. Carroll sings about the ecstasy of the moment. At long last, the ecstatic moment is gone, and her image fades back into the swirl of light in which it began. This entire segment is profoundly objectionable on any number of grounds, of course, but one offense in particular deserves attention: How worried could Itchy be about his son's safety if he's able to be so easily distracted by a woman with pink hair?

At this point, ■ valiant effort begins on the part of the screenwriters to restore the dramatic tension dispersed by the porn segment. (This begs the question of whether or not the credited screenwriters actually existed, since the entire affair has the decided whiff of improvisation.) Without warning, ■ team of Stormtroopers arrives at the house and, in an egregious violation of Fourth Amendment guarantees, begin to ransack the home searching for Rebel sympathizers and Alliance propaganda. These constitutional scofflaws overturn furniture, rifle through drawers, and in one feel-the-evil moment rip apart Lumpy's stuffed toy Bantha. Never one to stand idly by, Saundan entices an Imperial Guard with an object that looks like ■ boom box-cum-sewing machine. Twisting ■ couple of knobs amid a flurry of twitches and spasms taken straight from Carney's time on *The Honeymooners*, Saundan activates his box, subjecting the guard to a performance by none other than Jefferson Starship. The musicians, dressed in costumes that would embarrass Devo, dutifully flail away on their instruments while Marty Balin sings into what can only be described as ■ fluorescent sexual aid. The Diahann Carroll segment is positively restrained in comparison, and you half expect the Imperial Guard to order the entire home razed as a defense measure.

As the terrifying search continues, Lumpy wanders over to an out-of-the-way video screen and begins watching a cartoon. This is, believe it or not, the highlight of the *Special* and the only reason, apart from curiosity of the rubbernecking-at-car-crash sort, that the *Special* has any credibility among *Star Wars* fans. Created by the Nelvana Studios of Canada, the cartoon is of primary interest for comprising the first appearance of *Star Wars*' most popular villain, the notorious bounty hunter Boba Fett. Why such a cartoon (a) exists and (b) is in Chewbacca's home, no one ever explains, but you could reasonably assume that the cartoon is some kind of Alliance propaganda designed to bolster the morale of the good people caught beneath the boot heel of Empire. That it never occurs to Lumpy that this is exactly the kind of thing the Stormtroopers are wrecking his house to find, and that perhaps he should watch something else at this particular juncture, bodes ill for the long-term future of the Rebellion. But since every child needs his father to be a hero, and in the cartoon, Chewie lives up to the billing, we can forgive little Lumpy his foolishness.

The cartoon holds up pretty well, even apart from its interest as Boba Fett's debut. On a secret mission to find a magical amulet, Han and Chewie lose contact with their home base and go missing in a strange, watery world. Luke sets off in search of them and, after crash-landing on the planet, is rescued from a hungry sea monster by none other than Fett himself, looking remarkably like Space Ghost, riding an animal from Land of the Lost and armed with a utensil from a Brobdingnagian sewing kit. Fett takes Luke to the *Millennium Falcon*, where first Han and then Luke fall victim to a "sleeping virus," for which Fett offers to procure the antidote. Chewie, ever the intuitive judge of character, senses something amiss and insists on accompanying the enigmatic bounty hunter. Good thing, too, since Fett turns out to be in the employ of Darth Vader and is conspiring to turn the Rebels over to the Empire. The plot, however, is quickly foiled, and although Fett escapes, our heroes have a good chuckle at his expense as the cartoon concludes. Lumpy applauds.

Before we can take a moment to reflect upon the implications of the cartoon (Fett works for Vader? What magical amulet?), the *Special* rushes headlong into its unintentional—so we assume—apologia for the Empire. A video screen on the wall flickers into life, depicting a view of Tatooine from space while a stentorian voice informs viewers that the following unexpurgated vision of life on the planet is offered to Imperial citizens “in the hope that our own lives may be uplifted by the comparison and enriched with the gratitude of relief.” (If someone can explain what “the gratitude of relief” means, I would probably feel it.) The monitor cuts to the interior of Mos Eisley Cantina, the most popular bar in the galaxy, presided over here by tough-broad bartender Ackmena, who is courted by a smitten and hapless Krelman. In a casting choice that continues to haunt viewers, Ackmena is played by Beatrice Arthur, Krelman by Harvey Korman. Ackmena and Krelman indulge in some agonizingly protracted repartee before the real pain begins: a stunning musical number in which Ackmena (as a reminder, this is Bea Arthur) dances with Cantina patrons while singing about the sweet sorrow of closing time: “One more chorus, one more tune. It’s not the end, friend. If you’re a friend, friend. Then you come back to me, pal. To celebrate, pal. You have to wait, pal.” The bar empties, and as the video screen fades to black, we are left with a tableau of Krelman offering Ackmena a flower. What’s fascinating is that as an instance of propaganda and indoctrination, the whole scene is really quite effective. After seeing what goes on in Mos Eisley after-hours, a universe of fascistic repression looks pretty good.

Finding nothing incriminating in the apartment, the bad guys move on, leaving one ill-fated trooper, in the grand tradition of doomed and anonymous military flunkies, to stand guard alone. Soon Han and Chewie arrive, make short work of the Stormtrooper, and enter the home to much rejoicing and hugs all around. After some cringe-inducing chitchat (a typical example has Han kneeling in front of Lumpy and saying, “I think his voice is changin’. [Pause.] Come on, I’m just teasin’ ya.”), Han takes his

leave in order to give the family peace in which to observe their holiday. The rituals of Life Day apparently involve transportation to an astral plane, for soon the family stands amid the firmament, dressed in the long, red robes later used by Stanley Kubrick in *Eyes Wide Shut*, and join a procession of Wookiees marching into a ceremony hall. The celebration itself has a surprisingly sparse turnout, with only a dozen or so Wookiees in evidence, but the numbers are bolstered by the arrival of R2-D2 and C-3PO, and soon thereafter, Han, Luke, and Leia. The culmination of the Wookiee holy day has arrived, and we reach what is the most hallowed moment in the liturgical calendar of an entire species, the fulcrum around which its spiritual life spins: Leia singing "The Life Day Song." This sacred litany, sung to a lugubrious version of John Williams's ubiquitous theme, is an impassioned hymn to Life Day itself. "A day that brings the promise that one day we'll be free to live, to laugh, to dream, to grow, to trust, to love, to be." In other words, "The Life Day Song" is a paean to the day that brings the promise of another day. Life Day is a holiday with modest claims, it seems. As Leia concludes, a close-up of Chewbacca dissolves into a series of flashbacks of scenes from the movie before cutting to Chewie and the family seated around the dinner table, joining hands and bowing their heads. And on this peaceful scene of Wookiee domestic harmony, the *Special* mercifully concludes.

It should be clear from this brief and edited synopsis that watching the *Special* is an agonizing experience. The suffering, however, is not merely the result of it being the most abominable piece of "entertainment" as has ever been foisted upon television viewers. What is particularly painful is the way in which the *Special* manages to obliterate the quicksilver magic that inhabited the original movie. The wonder and awe that the film evoked—from the stunning shot tracking the terrifyingly immense underbelly of an Imperial warship to the stirring pomp and circumstance of the regal ceremony honoring Han and Luke's triumphant heroism—is an

essential part of that mysterious alchemy Lucas performed in transforming a hodgepodge of inherited mythologies and legends into an immutable touchstone of twentieth-century pop-cultural consciousness. What the first film conveyed was nothing less than a sense of the sublime, that aboriginal emotional and psychological response that the Romantic poets revered and sought so desperately in their poetry. Lucas managed to capture it in *Star Wars*, and twenty minutes of the *Holiday Special* is enough to snuff it out completely. Viewer response to the *Special* on that notorious evening in 1978 is impossible to reconstruct, but I suspect Obi-Wan neatly summarized the effect the *Special* had upon the American viewing public: "I felt a great disturbance in the Force, as if one million souls cried out in torment and were silenced at once." Oh, the humanity.

Once you move beyond the shocked, appalled silence the *Special* invariably induces, the question for the *Star Wars* fan is how to deal with the brute fact of its existence. How do we account for this monstrosity, this great blight in the cinematic universe? You could do what Lucas himself is said to have done, at least for a time, which is simply not to acknowledge the *Special's* existence. Unfortunately, not even the formidable power of Skywalker Ranch is enough to sustain the Stalinist suppression necessary for such a denial, particularly as samizdat, in the form of bootleg videos, kept cropping up. So Lucas eventually began publicly acknowledging the *Special*, the story goes, by expressing the understandable desire to see every copy of it destroyed. But unlike Henry II's wish to be rid of Beckett, the thorn in King George's side has never been removed: the *Special* continues to sit in video collections around the world, not to mention residing amid the psychic scar tissue of those unfortunate enough to see it. Milan Kundera once observed that "the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting." There are times, though, in which the capacity to forget, rather than to remember, is the more liberating, as anyone who has seen the *Special* can attest. But try as you might, the

debacle is impossible to erase from memory, and so the pain continues.

In the end, there is nothing to be done but acknowledge the *Special's* existence. So the pressing question for devotees then becomes how to account for it. The problem has two components, the first falling into the realm of theodicy: how could a benevolent Lucas be responsible for something so contemptible? As I noted earlier, following the "Well, have you seen *Howard the Duck*?" line of reasoning, I have no difficulty in assigning him blame, but for others the question can be more problematic. We want our heroes to be perfect, and when they fail us, the impulse is to reject them completely. Once you grant Lucas's responsibility for the *Special*, then veneration of him may be a bit tricky to maintain. "After such knowledge, what forgiveness?" T. S. Eliot asked, and fans who have fallen into knowledge of the *Special* must wrestle with the dilemma. In practice, though, most either ignore the question or just concede that the *Special* was a colossal blunder and try to move on. But moving on is not actually so easy to do because of the peculiar nature of Lucas's creation. What made *Star Wars* so compelling from the start was the sense that we were getting a glimpse into a unique, self-contained universe, one that existed apart from our own but with a historical and temporal continuity every bit as ordered and coherent as the universe in which we live. (I know, I know, technically speaking everything occurred in another galaxy—one that was far, far away, right?—and not in an alternate universe, but the effect is what I'm referring to here.) The Empire, the Rebellion, Tatooine, Jedi Masters, Mos Eisley Cantina, rogue smugglers—all these things existed *out there* somewhere, and we had stumbled upon them.

Since *Episode IV: A New Hope* first appeared, tremendous effort has gone into maintaining this sense of authenticity, of the reality of an extant *Star Wars* universe. The sweated labor involved in

maintaining this pretense is quite impressive. The difficulty arises from the sheer volume of *Star Wars* materials. In addition to the feature films, there have been a dizzying number of novels, comic books, television specials, radio dramas, board games, action figures, cartoons, and other media, all of which carry with them their own idiosyncratic part of the grand narrative of the *Star Wars* universe. And since all these products were created in a relatively haphazard fashion, all sorts of contradictions and discontinuities have arisen that must be reconciled in order for the coherence of the *Star Wars* universe to be maintained. One result is that great and intense debate rages in the realms of fandom over what constitutes *Star Wars* "canon." And of course, little highlights the problematic nature of determining canonicity more than an attempt to deal with the *Holiday Special*.


The very fact that the word "canon" arises in attempting to sort out these matters is telling, for it speaks to the unique, if not downright weird, relationship *Star Wars* fans have with the object of their devotion. The entire subject almost always assumes the trappings of the religious. The word "canon" is of course most often used within a religious context, and although even there it has multiple meanings, its primary use is as a referent to a collection or body of texts recognized as authoritative and universally binding within a worshipping community. In the Judeo-Christian tradition, the word is customarily defined as the list of writings acknowledged as genuine and inspired. The word itself comes to us through the sacred linguistic triumvirate of Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. Like the Latin word *canna*, the Greek word *kanon* is probably derived from, or at least associated with, the Hebrew word *qaneh*, which means reed or rod. *Kanon*, then, means rod, specifically a straight rod used as a rule, which is the place from which the other English meaning of canon—"rule" or "standard"—takes its origin. Since a rod used as a rule can be subdivided into smaller units and marked appropriately, *kanon* came to mean a series of marks, and thus was also used

to mean a "list" or "series." And this underlies the meaning that "canon" conveys today.

The word, though, is not restricted to a sacral meaning, as any English major can attest after having received his sixth or seventh gift copy of Harold Bloom's imperious *The Western Canon*. But it is the religious freight the word carries that is of particular interest here, for in almost any discussion of *Star Wars*, you will encounter religious terminology, concepts, and methodology. This essay—this entire volume, in fact—is no exception. You could argue that these gestures toward the religious are related to the innate human longing for something beyond the empirically verifiable, which in turn goes some way in explaining that *frisson* of recognition and delight that accompanied the debut of *Episode IV*. But whatever its origin and implications, the religious impulse is undeniably woven into the fabric of the *Star Wars* universe and into the discourse surrounding it. Upon reflection, then, it seems almost inevitable that a web site dedicated to piecing together information about *Episode I* before its release had as its webmaster a Roman Catholic priest. The priesthood is, after all, the intermediary office between the material and the metaphysical, between things seen and unseen. Nor is it surprising that discussions continue unabated to this day as to which fictions bearing the *Star Wars* imprimatur constitute canon and which ones are, well, "apocryphal." Debates over the matter are a staple on a number of *Star Wars* web sites, with arbiters offering rubrics of canonicity that range from the simple and severe (feature films only) to the scrupulously calibrated (a hierarchy involving fourteen gradations of reliability). I wouldn't be surprised to learn that somewhere there exists a rigorous calculus for determining the number of Wookiees that can dance on the head of a pin—cavorting that is undoubtedly choreographed to "The Life Day Song." As far as I know, that particular instance of scholastic hairsplitting has not yet occurred, but a number of efforts have been made to legitimize, for lack of a better word, other aspects of

the *Holiday Special*. The attempt to justify the ways of George to men, or at least to incorporate the disaster that is the *Special* into the warp and woof of his universe, is arguably noble in intent, but the truth is that the *Special* is too great a debacle to allow for anything more than feeble half gestures at justification. The members of Chewbacca's family, for example, make appearances in both the *Star Wars Encyclopedia* and the *Star Wars Character Log*, where we are given explanations for the embarrassment of their *Holiday Special* names. "Itchy," we learn, is actually the old porn-fiend's nickname, taken from his given name, Attichitcuk, while "Malla" is the shortened form of Mallatobuck. And "Lumpy," it turns out, comes from Lumpawarrump, which admittedly isn't much of an improvement but is at least consistent with the rest of the family's appellatory methodology.

None of this really does much in the way of accounting for the *Special*, but then no one has ever had much success in explaining cosmic catastrophe. At best, one just accepts it, somewhat like the existence of a Dark Side to the Force. But we can take solace in the fact that both the official and unofficial guardians of the *Star Wars* Industrial Complex will continue their battle to safeguard the coherence and integrity of the *Star Wars* universe. Even in the face of a calamity like the *Holiday Special*, the troops keep soldiering on, adjusting histories, realigning narratives, expanding appellations, and, in the case of Ackmena and Krelman's romance, practicing an essentially benign neglect. And that is reassuring, giving fans a new hope that, perhaps, one day we'll be free to live, to laugh, to dream, to grow, to trust, to love, to be.



PLANET ROCK: *Star Wars* and Hip-Hop

HARRY ALLEN

It's hard to overstate the impact of *Star Wars* on mass culture. Beyond, even, its then breakthrough visuals, this ultimate sleeper film thoroughly revolutionized the movie business—from how much a film could be expected to gross, to how widely it opened in theaters, to how it was marketed, to those areas from which revenue could be derived—practically inventing movie merchandising in the process.

However, hip-hop has been no slouch, either. Riding onto the cultural landscape just a few short years before Lucas's triumphant May 1977 juggernaut, hip-hop basically grew up with the Force and, like it, also largely transformed everything it touched. Perhaps by virtue of their mutually ignominious births, hip-hop and *Star Wars* also initially shared salient themes—that of principled innovators going up against entrenched opposition—that rang true for millions, resounding with unlimited cultural impact, leaving no one untouched.

Well, no one, except Luke Skywalker. Not the Jedi, but the forty-one-year-old Miami-based purveyor of butt-bobbing bass, aka Luther Campbell. Sure, *hip-hop* affected him. But *Star Wars*?

"I saw the first one—the shootin' and all that—but I don't know what was going on. I saw the girl in there. I didn't get it," he says.

That Lucasfilm sued and won a \$500,000 suit against Campbell in the late '80s over the use of the Skyywalker name certainly doesn't aid the love lack. And while Campbell says his indifference preceded the court's decision by a decade, he admits that the lawsuit purified his distaste: He won't be going to see *Attack of the Clones*, much as he avoided *The Phantom Menace*, despite the presence of Jedi Master Mace Windu, played by his favorite actor, Samuel L. Jackson, whose movies he watches "religiously." "Not this one."

Plus, "I had the name before the character," Campbell avers. Back in 1975 at Miami Beach Senior High, people started calling him Luke Skyywalker "'cause I played basketball good. Dunks and shit. Just like the other guy: Remember Kenny 'Sky' Walker, who played for the Knicks?"

For his apathy, Campbell credits *Star Wars*' FM-rock-blow-dried Trans-Am-halo, which he deems "totally white-oriented. [For me to get into it] it's gotta have some kind of blackness in it."

Reginald C. Dennis, thirty-five, former editor at *The Source*, *XXL*, and the editor-in-chief at *Manifest*, a GQ-like black men's magazine he's developing with partners, concurs on *Star Wars*' pastiness, noting that, in the original, "There's no black person with a speaking role. Watching *Star Wars* was like watching *Robin Hood*. And [yet] you couldn't stop black kids from going to see *Star Wars*."

Indeed, Dennis saw the movie at least five times the summer of '77, having, that previous winter, fervently consumed the pre-released *Star Wars* comic books. The film's ethos locked neatly into his own youthful, hip-hop one. "That you could go on an adventure filled with mindless destruction was very appealing to kids. And *Star Wars* was a movie where scores of people were killed, you saw an entire planet of people blow up—which I'd never seen before—and there was no blood. So, the movie's called *Star Wars*, and it made war fun, and so soon after Vietnam. Every kid I knew

wanted a laser gun and a lightsaber. It's no mistake that my generation is the most violent generation."

Did *Star Wars* have something to do with that? "I don't know, but when I saw *Star Wars*, I *liked* Luke Skywalker, but *Darth Vader* . . . if I was a Jedi Knight, I'd have been on the Dark Side as soon as I heard about it."

But what Dennis considers his destiny, Bronx-born and -raised rapper Q-Unique, of the hip-hop crew the Arsonists, is still attempting to resist. "*Star Wars* was possibly the most overwhelming movie I've ever seen in my life," he affirms. Seven years old when the first film was released, today he says he's collectively seen all four movies "about a thousand times."

For this artist, then, attempting to fashion a more politically conscious, antimaterialistic, countercorporate kind of hip-hop (in direct opposition to the variety that has seemingly seized control of all the nation's transmitters), the metaphors of *Star Wars* have direct bearing. "The Empire reminds me so much of the music industry itself, and of the underground artists that are fighting so much to stand up for the pure and what's righteous." These concerns have, then, seeped their way into the artist's work, fashioning a rich extended metaphor that analogizes the Empire and the \$15 billion-a-year U.S. record biz.

For example, on his track "Respect the Unexpected," quoth Q: "I'm the one who is predicted to lead the underground to victory / Over the evil industry." In his *Star Wars*/music business matrix, "the Stormtroopers would be the A&Rs, the CEOs would be the higher-ranked officers, and, at this point, there's *too* many Darth Vaders. Me, being well trained in the ways of hip-hop by the masters, such as [hip-hop founder] Afrika Bambaataa and [b-boy legend] Crazy Legs—who I would look at as Obi-Wan Kenobi and Yoda—I just gotta keep on going up against these evil industry people, and moving with the rebellion." And Q promises to further develop the theme of his training under these hip-hop Jedi Masters in an upcoming record to be called—what else?—*Star Wars*.

It's not just Q who considers the Force. The use of the *Star Wars*

corpus as a rich lode of metaphor is widespread in hip-hop. "Comin' back / Like *Return of the Jedi*" on Kool Moe Dee's 1987 "How You Like Now?" may or may not be the earliest such reference to the 1983 film, but it's by no means the only one:

"The fly guy with the Force like Luke Sky"; "I set shit off like Boba Fett" (Redman, "Can't Wait")

"Well I'm the Chief Rocka / Rips up like Chewbacca" (Do It All, Lords of the Underground, "L.O.T.U.G.")

"No doubt, under the influence of the *Falcon* / *Millennium* spaceship" (Black Thought, The Roots, "Without a Doubt")

"And never see three P.O.s!!!" (Lord Have Mercy, "Flipmode Is Da Squad")

"You know that I'm the man like Chewbacca knows Han . . . Solo" (House of Pain, "Feel It")

"Voices speak to me from long-gone Jedi Knights" (U.K. rapper Lewis Parker, "Rise")

"Phone home, or return like Jedi" (Rock, Fab 5 [Heltah Skeltah & O.G.C.], "Lefleur, Lefar, Eshoshka")

"*Star Wars* moving in like Han Solo" (Busta Rhymes, "Woo Hah! Got You All in Check")

"I get down with the Force of Luke Sky/Chewbacca, R2-D2 and the crew" (Erick Sermon, "Welcome")

"Meanwhile the goverment bring *Star Wars* from glock to glockers/C.O.P. has an APB out on Chewbacca" (Wyclef Jean, The Fugees, "The Beast")

"Obi-Wan Kenobi swore before me" (Rza, Killarmy, "And Justice for All")

"With the Force like Luke Skywalker" (Inspektah Deck, Wu-Tang Clan, "Hellz Wind Staff")

"In flight / Counterattack like a Jedi Knight" (Q-Tip, Busta Rhymes, "Wild Hot")

"Black starship control / I walk like I'm Darth Vader" (Kool Keith, "Dark Vader")

"I have something for you here / What is it? Your father's
TURNTABLES / The weapon of a Jedi Knight" (D. J. Stoic, "3PM
Migraine")

Whew! Now add a dash of crews with names like Jedi and Jedi Mind Tricks. Sprinkle in a taste of "Fortruss," the track by the Tampa-based Walkmen that carpets the "Imperial March" theme with lyrics thickly knotted by *Star Wars* references and samples. The Force will be with hip-hop culture—always—and vice versa. But this makes sense. Both *Star Wars* and hip-hop are realms of myth; trenchantly, though not exclusively, male in viewpoint; filled with colorful, often heroic, characters; and formally structured by stringent rites of passage.

These parallels are not invisible to everyday fans, either, especially those who are fans of both subcultures. Londoner Ossie Hirst—who, at twenty-one, doesn't remember a time before either *Star Wars* or hip-hop, having grown up in the age of both—notes, "I see parallels between the strict skills of learning some aspect of hip-hop and learning to be a Jedi. Both are very technique-based. When Luke is learning to use the lightsaber, while on the *Millennium Falcon*, it's like learning to [turntable] scratch or something. He keeps getting burned, but he's learning, and the same kind of dedication is needed in hip-hop." Agrees Philly native Steve S. Jackson, twenty-five, "I look at the lightsaber fights, and I think of moves that would be nice while b-boying," as breakdancing is organically known by those within the culture. Meanwhile, Troy Frazier, twenty-five, of Atlanta says the two worlds share core values, best summarized as, "Stand up for what you believe in, even in the face of seemingly insurmountable odds. Or as [the Roots'] Black Thought said 'Either stand tall or sit the fuck down.'"

Others derive different lessons from the films. Richard Quitevis, aka D.J. QBert, is former front man for the defunct Frisco Bay-based dj team Invisibl Skratch Piklz. Known to wield two Technics

the way Sith Lord Darth Maul wields a double-bladed lightsaber, QBert's seen the films "maybe twenty-five times each. I even have a Darth Vader computer mouse."

As the Piklz raided Earth's sounds for their own line of dj-battle records, George Lucas widely ravaged the planet's imagery to create *Star Wars'* unique retro-futuristic, otherworldly look. In *Episode IV: A New Hope*, Luke's seeker—the softball-like training sphere—was partially forged from truck-model-kit parts. The radiating shafts of the Death Star's fusion reactor in *The Return of the Jedi* were made from fifteen hundred fishing rods. Lucas incubated the rest of his films with other rich visual sources, sampled from as far and wide as Japanese samurai culture, cheap Republic movie serials, German fascism, Middle Eastern architecture, the Westerns of John Ford, *2001: A Space Odyssey*, West African sculpture, and American art deco.

Of Lucas's panoramas, says QBert, "He teases you with spurts of beauty." (Perhaps D.J. Premier and Guru's Gang Starr felt the same way; hence their liberal evocation of Lucas's feature film, *THX-1138* for their "You Know My Steez" video.) And indeed, QBert's solo debut, *Wave Twisters: Episode 7 Million: Sonic Wars within the Protons*, on his own as-innocuously-titled Galactic Butt Hair Records, pays homage to Lucas via its narrative of a dj-ing, b-boying dentist and his robot, out to save a beautiful woman—and the galaxy—from a masked villain called the Red Worm. In fact, when asked hypothetically what hip-hop track he would blast in his X-wing's sound system during a trench run on the Death Star, QBert cites "Cosmic Assassins," from his own album . . . and a recording composed with exactly such a scene in mind.

Still, "I didn't like the fact that the music in *Star Wars* didn't sound as futuristic as it should. Like in the Cantina scene?" he says, referring to the swing-styled melodies of that most memorable sequence. "I think some hip-hop music sounds *way* more advanced than what they were playing in the Cantina."

QBERT's implicit question—What would *Star Wars* become, were it to be reimagined through the mind of hip-hop?—is

answered noisily by Supergenius, aka Morgan Phillips, thirty-three. Like Q-Unique, seeing *Star Wars* at seven, he says, "was the beginning of my whole aesthetic world." On *Star Wars Breakbeats*, his own Suckadelic Records label bootleg, the sounds of the film series—racing TIE fighters, firing blasters, whirring machinery, and spirited human and alien vernaculars—get locked in step over fluid and funky grooves and percussion.

So, says Supergenius, instead of having Puffy rap defiantly in the maw of Godzilla—QBert's nominee for what he'd most want to shoot with the Death Star's turbo laser—"I thought, if you wanna put out a full-length record that's a compliment to a movie, why not just remix the movie itself, rather than have a bunch of corny bands trying to slap together a compilation? Why not really go into the sound of the movie and try to make tracks out of it?"

So he did, fashioning bruisers like "Trials of a Jedi," "One Smooth Character," "Greedo Plays Himself," and "Your Powers Are Weak Old Man"—that last track composed of the noise from Obi-Wan Kenobi and Darth Vader's crackling lightsaber battle over Zapp's "More Bounce to the Ounce," as Darth breathes menacingly, uttering and reuttering the title. Listening, it's easy to imagine that you're watching that alternate-universe version of *Star Wars* where, as Steve S. Jackson said, "Dr. Dre would be Vader (he just seems Vader-ish), Princess Leia would have to be Bahamdia (simply because I don't think there's any woman that's nicer than her), and Han Solo would be played by KRS-One."

But if you're still having a hard time picturing such entertainment, then just check out Supergenius's animated, fifty-second short, *Look, Sir: Droids*, in which b-boying Stormtrooper Kenner action figures windmill in Tatooine's ochre dust, under the watchful eye of an approving, head-nodding dewback.



JEDI UBER ALLES

TOM CARSON

Clocking in several years ahead of the political reality, the release of *Star Wars* in 1977 marked the cultural beginning of the Reagan era. I don't know if Jimmy Carter ever even saw the movie, much less grasped its significance. But one look at it ought to have been enough to tell him he was a goner. From his gingerly acceptance of the Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua to the dispirited-looking cardigans that symbolized his energy policy, Carter hoped to induce Americans to come to terms with an age of diminished swagger and reduced gratification, no easy job even for a president less charmless and unpersuasive than he turned out to be. While his bug-eyed ineffectuality would most likely have doomed the case no matter what, the opening blasts of the *Star Wars* theme—not-so-incidentally the first symphonic movie score to become a recognizable hit since the counterculture's advent—were the sound of Santa Anna's trumpeters playing the “Deguello” outside Carter's Alamo. The lines around the block at every theater showing the movie were a figurative declaration that the country had had it up to here with second thoughts. Like Tennessee Williams's Blanche DuBois, we didn't want realism; we wanted certitudes,

and triumphalism, and whooshing pomp. That's why it's always seemed appropriate that the Strategic Defense Initiative, the Reagan policy most at odds with observable fact—and in a competitive field, too—ended up borrowing its nickname from George Lucas's fantasy.

One reason fans bristle at the notion that their fanhood might have a larger cultural or sociological significance, of course, is that they consider their relationship to the movie to be paramountly meaningful for its own sake—calling it symptomatic of anything else diminishes rather than elevates it. Another reason is that Americans compartmentalize their politics like nobody else on earth, and get exasperated fast when anyone suggests that there's any overlap at all between how they vote and what they do for fun. In other words, discussing the politics of *Star Wars* is no very quick road to seeming engaging. And just to make things worse for myself, I'll put you on notice up front that I'm going to feel obliged to resort to a term that '60s radical chic-sters abused with such blithe abandon that it's triggered nothing but eye-rolling ever since. The word in question—look, I'm trying to get this over with, all right?—is fascism. Why, sure, you say, relieved. Everybody knows the bad guys are totalitarians, from those faceless Kitchen Aid storm troopers up through heavy-breathing, Nazi-helmeted Darth Vader himself. That's why, when Reagan wiped all the shades of gray out of the Cold War by calling the Soviet Union an "evil empire," everyone recognized the phrase as yet another *Star Wars* derivation; that nobody dismissed such talk as fit for a comic book may be the ultimate example of the movie's seepage from pure fantasy into people's real-world attitudes.

Now let's consider the good guys. They're the valiant rebels fighting to overthrow tyranny, which in movie terms is enough to guarantee their virtue (hey, that's what *we'd* do). In fact, though, their own authoritarian mystique beats the Empire's all hollow, just because it's much loftier and more stirring. What we have here is a heroic brotherhood of knights empowered by that *reductio ad absurdum* of comic-book Wagnerianism, "the Force," whose appeal

as primitivist, suprarational mumbo jumbo gets laid on with a trowel in the later films—even as it's gradually made clear that eligibility for the club is a matter of superior bloodlines; not the most democratic notion. Face it, it's not too hard to imagine that well-known cinema addict Hitler watching *Star Wars* with tears dripping down his cheeks until they soaked his mustache. He'd simply equate the Jedi with the Aryans, and the Empire with Jewish capitalists and the powers that imposed the Treaty of Versailles on Germany after World War I. The contending absolutes of "Good" and "Evil" are so free of definable content here—what makes good good? It fights evil; thanks, George—that nothing in the movie's schema would prevent him from doing so. In fact, a number of its ingredients might downright encourage him to do so.

This is partly a matter of imagery—most famously, Luke Skywalker's apotheosis in the final victory march, whose staging and lighting blatantly mimics Leni Riefenstahl's lionizing photography of Nazi rallies in *Triumph of the Will*. (That Lucas himself was the first to draw attention to this, with an air of pride that he hadn't wasted his time in film class, just proves that his own political naivete leaves the average koala bear looking like Cardinal Richelieu.) But the protofascist side of *Star Wars* is also built right into the film's premise, and the paradox is that the propaganda is ingenuous, not cunning. The attitudes are ingrained in the artistic DNA of the simpleminded pulp adventure tales of another age that Lucas's movie derives from, and whose disquieting gist he inadvertently made explicit simply by reproducing their appeal with such unthinking fidelity. Sometimes a naif ends up drawing a clearer map than a critic ever could.

The basic wish fulfillment in adventure stories for adolescent boys is twofold. On one side, they're often fantasies of community—either a heroic comradeship of like-minded souls ("No Gurls Allowed") or a fiefdom populated by willing satraps ("Cheetah Allowed," you might say). At the same time, they're also fantasies of power—not just heroic behavior but dominance of one's environment, a logical enough dream inversion of a real-world

environment that most youths experience as dominating them. All this is frequently mixed up with notions of service to some higher ideal or gnostic but righteous organization, because boys are entranced with the concept of duty; it makes them feel *recognized*. Make those values the hallmarks of a whole society, as Lucas innocently does, and suddenly, ending *Star Wars* with a nonjudgment at Nuremberg doesn't seem—as indeed it doesn't—at all inappropriate.

We like to call the appeal of such tales “perennial”—with Joseph Campbell's *Hero with a Thousand Faces*, that blunderbuss placed in the hands of the semiliterate, getting hauled out to endorse their permanence as myths. And yes, of course at some level they do derive from medieval romances, Nordic warrior legends, and so on—as does Nazism, at least in the self-romanticizing aspect so vital to its sales pitch. Even so, Lucas's more immediate source, the pulp adventure story specifically tailored for adolescent males, didn't really emerge as a distinct literary genre until the latter part of the nineteenth century, when one of its cultural functions was to help mold European boys for their imperial mission and American ones for manifest destiny.

The reason that the durable ingredients of such stories don't strike us as sinister even today is simply that they *predate fascism*; they originated in an era when attitudes we'd later learn to call fascistic in other contexts seemed benign and indeed admirable. Even when the real thing reared its head in the '20s and '30s, any number of Western intellectuals—though few in the countries that were actually experiencing it—were rather taken with this bold stuff, most notoriously that sucker for drawing-room absolutism George Bernard Shaw; that it was hotly debated just proves that it hadn't yet been decisively judged evil, which indeed it wouldn't be until the outbreak of World War II. At the pop-culture level, the very name of Superman—dreamed up in 1938 by two bright Jewish kids, who presumably knew that his moniker was English for *Übermensch*—is proof that, far from setting off alarm bells, concepts later tainted by their association with the Nazis were simply

part and parcel of Western culture's available usages (and thrills). In fact, it could be argued that the release of *Star Wars* was a milestone in the process of cultural forgetfulness by which damaged goods become undamaged—that is, innocuous—again; only a few years earlier, people's awareness of the real-world connotations of its particular mythology would still have been too vivid for Lucas's idealization of righteous, ritualistic young Siegfrieds to be looked on all that kindly.

Particularly since *Star Wars* is a kids' movie, it's reasonable to wonder just how tainted those concepts actually are, or should be. (You know, sheesh—are you going to let Hitler ruin *everything*?) Even back in the '60s, when I was the approximate age of Lucas's original target audience, my friends and I always found being the Germans alluring in our World War II games, and I don't believe that made us wicked. At an even earlier age, I was cuckoo for Kipling's *The Jungle Book*, and only recognized decades later that I'd lapped up some of the damndest kiddie-book propaganda for subjugation to racial hierarchies ever written. But while that's turned my understanding of Mowgli and his four-footed sepoyes more piquant, it hasn't made my affection for them—which is now, of course, affection for my own childhood—one whit less tranquil. On an adult level, if you've defended something like Madonna's "Justify My Love" by arguing that pop gives its audiences leeway to indulge sexual fantasies that they wouldn't dream of acting out in real life, it's hard not to concede that that should go for their political fantasies, too. No left-winger who loves John Wayne like I do should assume that there's necessarily a direct equivalence between the credos that thrill people in the dark and the ones they try to live by outside the theater. Try this as a syllogism: we live in a democracy, and movies are escapist. Doesn't it make sense that one of the things they offer us an escape from is democracy?

It's also undeniable that I would find the politics of *Star Wars* less off-putting if I responded to the movie with more delight at the level I'm supposed to, namely, entertainment. But I don't,

probably reason enough—if they even need one—for fans to take everything else I say with about a pound of salt. It bored me half senseless the first time I saw it, on a double bill with *Barbarella* at the old St. Mark's Theater in New York; the friend who took me insisted that we sit through *Star Wars* first, since he knew that otherwise I'd split as soon as *Barbarella* was over. (He was right, and it pissed me off that he had my number.) Ever since, I've begrudged George Lucas all the time I've had to put in thinking about *Star Wars* and its progeny; as a movie critic, I can't help feeling that I've got better things to do. But—well, he won: I may have very little use for the *Star Wars* movies as movies, but their magnitude as a cultural phenomenon compels my reluctantly respectful fascination just the same.

The main reason I'll never be a fan, though, is just that Lucas strikes me as so fundamentally humorless. There's a lot of crowd-pleasing horsing around in the *Star Wars* movies, but few glimmers of real cleverness or wit. Audiences may think the byplay between R2-D2 and C-3PO is proof Noel Coward has nothing on us, but they dote on the dopey earnestness of the trilogy's overarching concept, even when they're perfectly aware it's dopey. The real test of humor is the role you let it play in what you take seriously, and Lucas's comedy passages are always ghettoized diversions. They never impinge on the solemnity of the thematic stuff about the Force—and the Dark Father, and yadda-yadda-yadda—and, for him, the act of filmmaking itself isn't exactly imbued with merriment. Or style either, but many fans who know that tend to feel a tolerant affection for Lucas's clumsiness. Recognizing how inane he can be is what humanizes him for them. Maybe he helped inaugurate the age of sleek, hi-tech special-effects spectacles but, *The Phantom Menace* aside, people love the *Star Wars* movies for their *homeliness*—the clunky, straightforward, sophistication-allergic sincerity of it all.

Needless to say, that includes an allergy to political sophistication. It's worth emphasizing again that Lucas's relationship to his own material's dark side is unwitting, if not stubbornly ignorant.

Pleased though he may have been to learn that his tale fit Joseph Campbell's recipe for mythic alphabet soup, a thinker he isn't; indeed, he actively mistrusts reflectiveness. If his actual political views remain gnomic, that's largely because politics are unimportant to him. The only overt allusion to current events in any *Star Wars* movie is a perfunctory gesture to conventional Hollywood liberalism; reflecting Bill Clinton's then recent impeachment crisis, *The Phantom Menace* finds room for a very silly pro-Clinton subplot that luckily goes by in an eyeblink. (It's damn near the only thing in that crawling movie that does.) Otherwise, though, Lucas's fundamental worldview apparently remains that of the Modesto shopkeeper he might well have become if he hadn't discovered movies—in which arena, of course, he's the most successful businessman-artist since Disney. Very little really matters to him except his own product, and like a good salesman, he believes in it absolutely.

Whether Lucas would find the kinship grating or gratifying (and who knows?), it's this combined know-nothingism and faith that gives him common ground with another great salesman, Ronald Reagan—who was also, of course, a fellow storyteller. Both, in their way, urged us to become as children again, and invested that condition with a moral superiority that more than made up for being uninformed. Melding tomorrow with a yesterday that never was, Lucas's invitation to the audience to return to the comforting simplicities of an earlier era of entertainment was as ideologically loaded as Reagan's summons to hark back to an earlier state of historical ignorance-as-bliss, because you can't uncritically revive the pulp narratives of another age without also replicating their values. Famously, Reagan once spoke wistfully of a time when "Americans didn't even know they had a racial problem"—meaning, of course, *white* Americans, since those of color had presumably been well posted on its existence since 1492. With the possible exception of David Lynch, who's like his twin brother gone bad, Lucas may be about the whitest—and most goyish—American filmmaker alive, and he's always balked at admitting that the fairy tales he loves have a racial problem, too.

It's a trickier one than it at first appears to be. Back in 1977, it missed the point to complain about the first *Star Wars* movie's all-vanilla human cast, and Lucas's stopgap attempt at a remedy—plunking Billy Dee Williams into *The Empire Strikes Back* and later Samuel L. Jackson into *The Phantom Menace* without ever finding much for either to do—was equally irrelevant. As I would bet everyone had intuitively grasped without articulating it, nonwhite characters had been depicted in the series from the start. It's just that they appeared as Wookiees, Ewoks, funny robots, Jawas, and so on, leading up to the ultimate insult of that calypso-spouting, pan-galactic Stepin Fetchit, Jar Jar Binks. Without seeming quite aware of what he was saying, Lucas once even talked up Chewbacca as a plug for multiculturalism (what was he, Canadian?). When you learn that the Jawas' twittering jabberwocky was actually doctored Swahili, you can't help wondering how this filmmaker can stay so blandly oblivious to the distasteful implications of what he's doing, if he really is.

All this goes back to Lucas's sources—the adolescent fables of an age when white superiority was taken for granted and swash-buckling adventure in exotic lands dramatized the imperial mission at its sexiest, a genre whose stereotypes got transplanted lock, stock, and barrel to sci-fi once all those H. Rider Haggard heroes started running short on places to romp here on earth. (As the inventor of both Tarzan and John-Carter-on-Mars, Edgar Rice Burroughs is an almost literally pivotal figure here.) Every sci-fi fan understands that depicting alien creatures on other planets is usually a way—conscious or not—of talking about alien peoples on our own, and the form is basically so open-ended that it can accommodate enlightened propaganda as easily as the benighted kind. After all, television's most lasting monument to the Great Society's liberal optimism is the original *Star Trek*, with its endless lobbying for multiculturalism and vision of a pan-galactic UN; that many Trekkies choose to identify more with Vulcans or even Klingons than their fellow earthlings is, in a way, Gene Roddenberry's ultimate triumph. Lucas, however, reverts to the most retrograde version of the fantasy; one type of relationship never featured in

the *Star Wars* movies is nonhuman characters interacting with human ones as equals. From that hairy, seven-foot-tall Gunga Din Chewbacca to Yoda, the Jedi's answer to Jiminy Cricket, they're our heroes' adorable helpmeets and servants if friendly, and repulsive, comic grotesques or menacing, emotionless machines if not. (If you want to protest that Yoda is a superior being, not a lesser one, well—try to imagine him having a sex life. Try to imagine him up and deciding that he's got better things to do than dispense comically phrased fortune-cookie wisdom to young ofays.)

It suggests how ingrained this sense of hierarchy is that audiences respond to its "rightness" as the natural order of things without, presumably, realizing what they're responding to. Viewers without particular memories of Stepin Fetchit or Butterfly McQueen are probably serenely unaware of the offensive tradition that Jar Jar Binks revives. (Uh-uh: they hated Jar Jar for his own sake.) Modern moviegoers, being fortunately unfamiliar with what an old-fashioned anti-Semitic caricature looks like, undoubtedly don't recognize that *The Phantom Menace's* grasping, mercenary junkyard trader is one. Since his own nostalgia, like Reagan's, is partly a rebellion against the critical spirit that insisted on looking behind such things, Lucas himself may not recognize it either. What helps him get away with reviving stereotypes like these is that he seems to relate to them purely as entertaining pop conventions, without the faintest notion of their import. Yet that's just why his unnerved inclusion of token African-American actors in the later *Star Wars* episodes is more a betrayal of his vision than the correction of a mere oversight. His cosmos's old-fashioned racial schema—equating white people with human beings, and depicting everybody else as Other—is in fact so organic to the concept that the presence of black faces in the human cast registers as, quite simply, an aesthetic flaw.

The blackest visage of all, of course, is Darth Vader's mask, and I don't think it's entirely coincidental that the villain's voice was contributed by James Earl Jones—a black actor so commanding that white Americans have actually felt most comfortable with

him as a disembodied voice. In Lucas's sexless universe, Darth Vader is also something that only Han Solo, otherwise, is implicitly allowed to be, namely, virile; that's part of what makes him threatening, like King Kong. I think it's indisputable that, at some level, audiences did perceive Darth Vader as black. Wasn't that why there was such a sense of letdown when his features were finally revealed, as if Lucas had pulled a bait-and-switch by substituting some schlubby white actor for the imposing black man we knew was inside that helmet? America's racial pathology is such a stew that appeals to it don't need to be either conscious or coherent to resonate, and from this angle the fact that Darth Vader turns out to be Luke's father is less important than the way Luke experiences it as a taint. It's hard to suggest this at all without seeming to overstate it, but I can't help suspecting that part of what makes the whole Dark Father business powerful is the way we register it, subliminally, as a projection of what used to be Western culture's idea of the ultimate sexual horror: miscegenation. Lucas has certainly toyed with this elsewhere in the series; at the beginning of *Return of the Jedi*, when Princess Leia is in captivity, it's unmistakably the outer-space version of that classic darkest-Africa pulp fantasy: the white girl about to be despoiled by slobbering savages. Revealingly, the sequence is also the only time our heroine gets to exhibit any erotic allure—who'd have guessed that, under that bland pie-face, Carrie Fisher was pure hubba-hubba below the neck?

All the same, Lucas's great advantage over other would-be genre revivalists—that is, his fellow boomer film-school nebbishes, most of whom attempted at one time or another to make self-conscious pastiches of the films they'd loved in their youth—is that these throwbacks and reversions to primitive movie tropes never seem premeditated, much less arch. Programmatic he isn't, at least not in this series. It's interesting that, despite their huge popularity at the time, the Indiana Jones movies haven't retained anything like the hold the *Star Wars* trilogy has on the public's affection, perhaps because—was this Spielberg's influence?—their old-timey thrills


do seem mechanically contrived. But Lucas's ace in the hole is that he's suggestible, not calculating, and his almost eerie absence of preconceptions—which is what he shares with David Lynch—is the most interesting thing about him. Before he dreamed up Luke Skywalker, he was on board at one point to direct *Apocalypse Now*, and what drew him to the material was fascination with the idea of a tiny country bringing a superpower to its knees. If this rings a bell for *Star Wars* fans, it should; the Ewoks are the oddest cinematic tribute that the Vietcong are ever likely to get.

Instead, needless to say, *Apocalypse Now* ended up being directed by Francis Ford Coppola, whose complex relationship to his onetime protégé—half the hare and the tortoise, and half Mozart and Salieri playing musical chairs—is likely to end up as the richest moveable feast for budding dissertation writers since Hemingway and Fitzgerald. Meanwhile, ironically enough, *Star Wars* and its sequels became Hollywood's metaphorical cure for America's post-Vietnam trauma, turning Coppola's (willfully) tormented reexamination of the conflict into an anachronism by the time it appeared. Not long afterward, Reagan entered the White House, holding out the heartening promise that the simpleminded Manichaeism of Lucas's imaginary universe wasn't just fit for fantasy, but a perfectly valid approach to real-world problems.

One obvious reason that *Star Wars* chimes so well with Reaganism is that, like Lucas, Reagan got most of his ideas about the world from old movies. In their separate realms, though, they both also expressed one of this country's most cherished conceptions of itself, benignly endorsing American exceptionalism in all its ahistorical innocence and sense of virtuous, sanctified mission. Among resonances closer to home, while the Jedi may be rebels, they're also *conservative* underdogs; they aren't fighting to bring about a new order, but to restore an old one, making them far more palatable to mainstream Americans than revolutionaries would be. The conviction that they were on a mission to wrest the country back from people who had traduced it was what made Reaganism a romantic cause to its adherents, too; that was why they never considered themselves radicals.

It's as a fairy-tale projection of how Americans view the world and their own role in it that *Star Wars* is most fascinating. Lucas invents other cultures, but, partly because his imagination doesn't exactly thrive on details, he's remarkably uninterested in making them seem valid or organic. He just wants them to be picturesque—either cute or frightening. He's equally indifferent when it comes to getting us to feel any compassion for the Empire's victims; it's as if that would just be a distraction from his heroes' gallantry, rather than helping to motivate it. When a whole planet gets destroyed, it's with nary a hint of death or suffering—which, right, would only upset the kiddies. But would at least a hint that they *ought* to find the sight upsetting really come amiss? The galaxy's only function seems to be to provide an arena for righteous derring-do, and its nonhuman inhabitants are, first and foremost, disposable—conveniences, but never characters.

If American audiences don't find this bothersome, that's because they find it natural—or did, until September 11, 2001, jolted us out of our tendency to see the rest of the world as little more than a theme park. But these jolts have never been permanent. *Star Wars* is a perfect fable for America's sense of its own goodness, but it also shows how unreflective that sense can be.



A BIG DUMB MOVIE ABOUT SPACE WIZARDS: Struggling to Cope with *The Phantom Menace*

TODD HANSON

Go ahead and make fun of me all you want, I've heard it all before. But here's the thing:

We waited a good half our lives for it to come out, and when it did, it was as if the destructive power of a fully operational battle station had been unleashed on the childhood hopes and dreams, accumulated over more than two decades of unwillingly delayed gratification, of pretty much a whole generation (and yes, I realize how pretentious those five words sound in this context, but seriously, I mean it—*pretty much a whole generation*, or at least a particular sociocultural subset sizable enough to constitute a really, really big chunk of one)—shot down like a bullseyed womp rat back in Beggar's Canyon back home; sliced open like the stinking underbelly of a frostbite-eviscerated tauntaun in the vast and unforgiving Hoth tundra; exploded into a trillion shimmering fragments of rubble and debris in the skies over the Forest Moon of Endor or the (similarly forested) Fourth Moon of Yavin.

Except that it wasn't: Although one cannot help but be drawn to such bombastic and overblown metaphors to describe, looking back dazed and bewildered on the experience, what the hell

exactly happened, in truth there was nothing dramatic or sensational about it. Instead, what it evoked were far less interesting childhood memories: standing for forty-five minutes, wondering what to do, in a parking lot outside of a locked grade school, because your big sister forgot to pick you up after band practice; sitting through the crushing boredom of Vacation Church School on a Saturday morning while knowing that each excruciating minute you were there you were missing Captain Kool and the Kongs on the *Kroft SuperShow*; or wanting to sneak out back and have your first cigarette with the Ozzy-worshiping lowlifes from shop class but having instead to listen to your toupeed English teacher drone on about T. S. Eliot's point in saying "this is the way the world ends / not with a bang but a whimper."

The Inevitable Anticlimax: It's an old story. The eventual fall from an ecstatic flight into escapism back to the mundanity of real life. There's nothing surprising about that—it happens, literally, all the time, by which I mean to say *every* time: every single escapist daydream, since Cro-Magnons first dreamed up names for the people whose shapes they saw in the stars and made up stories about the wars these gods fought with one another in the heavens, has ended the exact same way—not with bang, but a whimper. This one hurt, though. This one hit us where we lived (or wished we did)—sure, it was underwhelming, but that word doesn't even come close to conveying what we're talking about here because, for most people who saw it, it was underwhelming *in the extreme*, if such an oxymoronic phrase can even be said to make any sense at all. And it wasn't just the hard-core geeks who reacted this way, either (although they, poor souls, were the hardest hit, and as of this writing, almost three years since it happened, it still looks as if many of them will never recover, sitting motionless in their parents' basements, staring mournfully at their vast collections of R5-D4 and Dewback-Mounted Desert Stormtrooper figures with blank, wounded expressions, wondering what it all *means* anymore), but the regular normal-person populace as well: conditioned by months of hype and speculation and Taco Bell promotions and

all the rest of the Vast Insidious Machineries of Consumerism to expect nothing less than some messianic Second Coming, however—many millions of them stood up from their overpriced seats in the multiplex as the lights came up on opening weekend and said to each other, “It was okay, I guess, but . . . uh . . . that’s it?”

Yep, that was it all right: despite all the goings-on-and-on about the “magic” and “wizardry” of the Vaunted Auteur’s “visionary creative genius” and what-have-you, at the end of the day what *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* all came down to was a Big Dumb Movie About Space Wizards, for what it’s worth, and nothing more.

It may seem silly (and rightly so, I suppose—hey, don’t ask me to intellectually justify any of this, because, efforts of countless sociocultural commentators to the contrary notwithstanding, if you ask me, the whole concept of approaching the *Star Wars* phenomenon from an “intellectual” standpoint still strikes me as barking up the wrong tree) that the spectacularly underspectacular failure of *The Phantom Menace* to achieve the same hold on the public imagination as the films it prequeled should be seen as some sort of Significant Cultural Event. I guess that’s fair. Still and all, though, it was one, and why exactly this should be the case is a matter that takes some explaining, and indeed making sense of *The Phantom Menace* is ■ much more complicated Gordian (or should I say Mandalorian?) knot than one would at first think a Big Dumb Movie About Space Wizards would have any right to be.

It’s sort of embarrassing to admit this, but the fact of the matter is that the release of *Star Wars Episode I* was, for me, a profoundly personal sort of Really Big Deal that set off a full-blown shitstorm in my head, starting well before the film even came out and which has really yet to subside to this day. And I wasn’t alone in this: everybody who bought into the prerelease excitement (and let’s face it, pretty much everybody did, even the most cynical and media-weary members of a generation conditioned by thirty-plus years of mass media hoo-ha to react with smart-ass dismissal to any sort of Giant Mainstream Media Event at all, people normally impervious to such

mass manipulation from the marketplace, who actually *pride* themselves in not caring about stuff they're told to want to consume) felt like they got took. Different people reacted differently to the feeling, but everybody felt it. The way I personally dealt with this humiliation (and, believe me, the endless ribbing I took from friends and loved ones continues unabated, even now, three years later) may not be a very pretty picture, but if nothing else, it does, hopefully anyway, make for a funny story at my own expense.

Go ahead and make fun of me all you want, but for me, grappling with *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* involves trying to get at the heart of some really bizarre shit.

Shit, *to wit* (and these are just a few of the more obvious questions, off the top of my head):

1. Jesus, how bad could this movie possibly be anyway?
2. Man, weren't those first ones great, though?
3. Why, then, wasn't this one?
4. If it's so bad, why does everybody keep going to see it?
5. Why would anybody even care about these questions in the first place anyhow?
6. What the hell is the deal with those Japanese accents?
7. If, in the entire history of cinematic vocabulary, there had never before existed any such thing as a Tragicomic Bumbling Space Frog Archetype, why the fuck would anybody, least of all a supposed Vaunted Auteur whose visionary creative genius and deep insight into Joseph Campbell's *Power of Myth* had made a profound impact on pretty much a whole generation, ever, ever want to create one?
8. And why, in God's name, would a thirty-year-old, reasonably intelligent adult want to walk around in public dressed in the robes of a Jedi Knight?

We may never know the answers to these questions.

Let me get one thing straight, right off the bat here, right now: I am not a *Star Wars* geek. Yeah, yeah, I know—you think I doth

protest too much—but honestly, for me, *Star Wars* appreciation is not some kind of lifestyle, the way it is for the sort of person who actually sits down with another human being to debate issues like whether or not *Slave 1* could outrace the *Millennium Falcon* in a fair fight, or the backstories of Admiral Pielt and General Veers, or whether or not the digestive tract of an asteroid-belt-dwelling Giant Space Worm would have Earth-type gravity so that people who accidentally flew into it thinking it was just a cave could walk around inside it without knowing they were not actually in a cave at all but were, rather, inside an asteroid-belt-dwelling Giant Space Worm instead. I do not consider any of these things even remotely important at all. God bless them, but to me, all the *Star Wars* geeks are committing the same essential error as those intellectual socio-cultural commentators that I would argue are barking up the wrong tree—that is, they are taking all of this Space Opera Nonsense way, way too seriously. No, I am not a *Star Wars* geek, but I do understand them, because I have a lot of *Star Wars* geek friends.

Not to put too fine a point on it, the apoplexy of these people in the face of the release of *Episode I* was truly a sight to behold. They were stunned, then shocked, then stunned again at how unthinkable it was that the movie was something less than what they'd expected. They were gap-mouthed with incredulity. One such friend of mine, Vebber, was willing (this is not a joke) to pay One Thousand Actual U.S. Dollars (he writes for TV, so he can afford to do stuff like that) for the privilege of seeing the film three days early, that's how excited he was. (The screening was a charity event, and when I told him that if nothing else, at least the money was going for a good cause, he was silent, and when I asked him what the cause was, he said, "I have no idea. Probably crack babies or something. What do I care?") He actually told me he was afraid he might wet his pants when the film started, and knowing him very well, I believed it. Though Vebber didn't end up seeing this screening after all (pitilessly leaving, presumably, the crack babies to their own devices), his equally rabid friend Mark did get to one of the advance showings (Mark is I guess what you'd call a

Professional Science Fiction Fan Community Luminary—I believe he was once described in print as “one of the world’s leading Treksports”—I didn’t even know that was a word—and so probably has as much loyalty to the overall concept of Space Opera Nonsense as any man alive), and he was so incensed, so outraged, that he stormed out afterward shouting angry warnings to the people waiting in line for the next screening. As they yelled at him not to give anything away, and the die-hard loyalists in the crowd remained rooted in denial, insisting that he could not possibly be right, he must have looked like a crazed doomsday prophet running amok in the streets, like Kevin McCarthy in that incredible scene at the end of the original *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*. “It’s terrible!” he shouted in a panic, his entire worldview, he would later say, collapsing around him. “It’s absolutely terrible!”

And it really just sort of undeniably is.

The best description I ever heard of why was from that same guy, Mark, who said, “Think of it from a storytelling perspective. Instead of a mythological saga of good versus evil, almost all of the plot is about two guys whose spaceship breaks down and they need to get parts to repair it,” and he is completely correct. The script is, to put it baldly, totally fucked. The epic elements at the beginning and end—an invasion of a virtuous planet by a corrupt merchant class, a gigantic, Kurosawa-style battle between an underdog insurrection and a relentless mechanized army they cannot possibly defeat, a noble and idealistic young queen, interplanetary politics on a grand scale, the resurrection of the ancient and unspeakable evil along with a quasi-Messianic saga of biblical import, as well as a full-blown space-navy battle and, of course, the chance to see the once-great Jedi Knights, wiped out into extinction by the start of *Episode IV* back in 1977, in all their antediluvian glory—are inexplicably rushed through with palpable impatience, while the film’s bloated middle section is as saggy and ponderous as Lucas’s own middle-aged billionaire gut must surely be now.

The sheer incompetence of the pacing and structure is nothing short of bewildering, and even simple, obvious things that could have been done to even the structure along are just bypassed, almost as if Lucas had chosen to make the film appear intentionally amateurish. Take, for example, Sith lord Darth Maul's first attempted attack on the principals. We get only a few shots of what is apparently supposed to consist of menace and suspense as he lands on Tatooine and begins to hunt the Jedis there with probe droids—I don't believe I'm exaggerating when I say that there have been episodes of TV's *The Equalizer* that contained more ominous buildup than Lucas manages to achieve with these barely-there sequences. Then, when he does finally attack, the entire battle between him and the Jedi master Qui-Gon Jinn lasts all of thirty or so seconds. Jesus, you want to yell at the screen, why even bother setting up the cameras for a lightsaber battle if you're only going to have it last less than a minute? Might as well just include thirty more seconds of tedious pans across the Tunisian desert and shave a couple of million dollars off the budget, making it possible to manufacture several hundred thousand additional toys.

Another great example of this confusing inattention to detail is the droid ships that we see in the Trade Federation hangar bay in the beginning scene, pictured walking around on four legs and swiveling their elongated heads around ominously to look at the landing ambassador's ship as Obi-Wan and Qui-Gon arrive. Apparently—not that you'd know this by watching the film—these four-legged droids fold up into planes and are the same things that we later see the Naboo fighter pilots dogfighting with at the end. Lucas bothered to have the things designed, and he must have decided to film that introductory establishing shot of them—it's in the final edit of the film, after all—so why not include even one simple example of them folding up so the audience can realize what's going on? It's just ridiculous, and there's no explanation ever offered as to why we don't see them again until they're in midair.

Watching these kinds of glaringly obvious mistakes makes it seem like the filmmakers weren't even bothering to try—the whole

thing starts to scan like a term paper written at the last minute by a drunk frat guy pulling a halfhearted all-nighter. It's especially hard to take when juxtaposed with the seeming hours of publicity footage of Lucas droning on and on about why he made this choice or that in the creative process of forming and molding his unique vision to the screen. Who does he think he's fooling, one asks? Is he completely delusional? What's with all the auteur-talk when the finished product appears to be slapped together at the last minute? No wonder the nerds' worldviews started to crack.

Watching this stuff, obsessing over it during that odd summer of 1999, I kept assuming that they'd simply screwed up the editing somehow, and that the film might someday be returned to its original state by simply reinserting some of these sequences later on. Sadly, one look at the extra scenes included in the DVD release reveals that this is not the case. Take the example of the movie's much-rumored Greedo-wrestling-with-Anakin scene, in which Qui-Gon catches the two youngsters scuffling in the street and then upbraids Anakin for fighting. The sequence is obviously missing because it's where Anakin gets the scratch that Qui-Gon later gets the blood sample from that reveals the child's abnormally high midichlorian levels. The nerd word on the street was that this scene had Qui-Gon telling Anakin "You must learn to control your anger!" which would make perfect narrative sense as foreshadowing of the boy's later descent into evil and conversion to the dark side of the Force. As it turns out, though, there's nothing remotely like it in the scene! It's enough to make the midichlorians in anyone's blood boil just thinking about it—that's how frustrating it is.

There are many theories about why the second *Star Wars* movie Lucas directed compares so poorly to the first one; mine is that he really needs a good editor, and his first one—his now-ex-wife, Marcia Lucas, by all reports one of the finest in the business—whose cutaways, timing, and deft touch with pacing and suspense lent so much of the excitement to the original, isn't with him (or, in fact, the business) anymore. But like I said, it doesn't make sense

to approach this film from an academic standpoint, so these observations are all really beside the point.

Question: How hard can it be to make a Big Dumb Movie About Space Wizards and have it turn it out reasonably well? After all, it's not as if there are a lot of subtle character shadings to flesh out—if you want to establish that some guy is evil, all you've got to do is paint his head an abstract pattern of red and black and put horns on his head.

So why did everybody end up feeling so let down by this thing, this by all accounts what should have been simple, straightforward (albeit bombastic, huge, and overblown, but still) piece of unambitiously lowbrow entertainment? Especially when they were all so willing to like it, even to the point, for some, of actually dressing up like a Jedi Knight, if you can believe it?

Why would anybody do anything that stupid? I mean, what kind of a complete moron would a person have to be?

The answer to that question—why would anybody care that much in the first place—is really pretty simple (and for those of you who were there, I'm sure I don't even need to explain) and it's this: for anyone who saw it, as a little kid, growing up in 1977 suburban America, *Star Wars* was—indisputably, without question—the Coolest Thing They Had Ever Seen in Their Entire Life So Far. Nothing else that came before it—I mean nothing—prepared us, going into those darkened theaters with our dads, for the full-on, go-for-broke, all-out Mind-Blowing we were about to receive. For kids of that time, raised as we all were (and our parents too, and as all subsequent generations of suburban Americans have been as well) on the concept of consumer entertainment as the whole *raison d'être* of your little-kid-existence (I'm talking here about paging through the Sears Catalog's pre-Christmas edition, the Sears Wish Book I believe it was actually called, and gazing lustfully at the various G.I. Joe figures, knowing that if only you could somehow get them all, your life would be complete; watching Godzilla

movies or the hammy Adam West version of *Batman* on TV after school and knowing that you were set for hours of pure bliss because the *Spider-Man* cartoon was coming on next, and then *Prince Planet*, and then *Speed Racer*; watching the commercials for multicolored plastic Whammo! Products that parents hooked garden hoses up to and which then spun wildly around and thinking if *only I had that*; watching the adults get plastered and play Jarts in the backyard and thinking *man those things are so neato*—at least for those of us who didn't *die* that way; just being so spaced out on the sheer whiz-bang wonderment of it all—on what I would, if I wanted to get a lot more pretentious here than I actually do, call by French Situationist Guy Debord's term the society of the spectacle—that you actually thought all those shitty, shitty Scooby-Doo-derivative-mystery-solving-kids-plus-cartoon-mascot cartoons like *Goober and the Ghost Chasers* or *Captain Caveman and the Teen Angels*, for cryin' out loud, were cool), well, in that environment, when *Star Wars* came out, it was the equivalent of some sort of SALT II-era thermonuclear weapons (which you'd perhaps just begun to get the tiniest clue about but which would occupy a whole lot of mental space in your life later on) having gone off in your head.

I was born in the autumn of that head-spinning year 1968, the year that everything went to hell, and as it turns out it was a great time to be born, because it meant that I was exactly eight years old going nine in the summer of 1977—really just the exact perfect age to be when *Star Wars* came out. It was as plain as day, a truism that didn't need to be justified, an axiomatic *fact of nature*, that *Star Wars* was better than anything else you'd previously encountered. It was just *obvious*, kids didn't even need to say it to each other: it was just Known, it was Understood. And not just better, but way better: ten, twenty times cooler than whatever the last coolest thing we'd ever seen had been. Not even the really, really great stuff we'd seen and experienced—the very best of it, like, say, the WGN-TV five-day "Gorilla Thrilla Week" lineup of *King Kong*, *Son of Kong*, *Mighty Joe Young*, *King Kong Versus Godzilla*, and the original *Planet of the Apes* on the after-school 3:30 movie—could

compare. It dwarfed whatever it was it had put into second place—you couldn't even *see* second place. Second place was somewhere off the bottom of the page.

I had one of those stupid cardboard-stand things that Mattel made available for the Christmas shopping season that you had to wait several months to get the action figures to go with because they didn't have the toys made yet—still perhaps the record holder for most ludicrous consumer frenzy item ever—and it was the best gift I got that year and maybe even ever, even though it was, literally, nothing. I copied terrible versions of the Ralph McQuarrie production drawings from *The Star Wars Sketchbook* onto huge sheets of construction paper in my room and hung them on my walls—what a cool book that thing was (man, I wish I still had it, but it eventually became a pile of loose papers falling out of a collapsed binding after too many page-throughs—I loved that book so much I physically destroyed it with love). I had never shown any interest in baseball cards but I collected with relish all sixty-three of the initial *Star Wars* bubblegum cards, the ones with the light blue borders, and it took me a whole summer of intense effort to get the complete set (and no, I don't have that anymore, either).

So no I'm not a *Star Wars* geek, at least not anymore I'm not, but I was then—if you define the term “*Star Wars* geek” as “person for whom *Star Wars* is so ridiculously cool that it's become a central aspect of their existence,” which is what most people, I assume, take it to mean. But the thing is: so was *everyone*—every single last eight-year-old I knew of, to greater or lesser degree. There weren't any *Star Wars* geeks back then because in 1977, the words “*Star Wars* geek” and “little kid” meant the exact same thing. For anyone who grew up at the right time for it, the validity, power, and sheer significance of *Star Wars* had a kind of emotional undeniability that bypassed the intellect and defied any need for rational or analytical explanation: That's the reason there are so many *Star Wars* geeks today (and that I know so many of them, and that I know you do, too)—they remain transfixed, even now, well into their thirties, all

over the place, dotting the landscape; the same reason that kids (if they had the means) went to see it dozens of times that summer (like the samizdat cartridge in *Infinite Jest*, it was so entertaining that it inspired the immediate desire to see it again); that's why Alec Empire, founder of the Berlin digital hard-core scene and frontman of the band Atari Teenage Riot, has an entire instrumental album called *Generation Star Wars*. It was an a priori given in your life. That's the reason all this stuff means so much to the people for whom it means so much.

It may sound ludicrous that a childhood-defining experience would come out of something as banal and shallow as our base consumer culture, but we were growing up in a base consumer culture, so it actually makes sense. Waiting for the stupid little Luke and Leia and Darth and the other toys to finally show up in the mail was an eternity. But that was nothing compared to that other, more impossible eternity, the one I just couldn't wrap my head around, because it was too big: I had read (and saved, and read again) the *Time* magazine article about George Lucas's future plans (I no longer remember when this was, it may have been as late as 1980, but I'm thinking it was more like 1978) and it said there was not only going to be a sequel, there were going to be *nine* films . . . nine! . . . and after the first three, there would be three that took place a generation earlier . . . and I thought to myself, sitting in my little kid room alone, *oh my God, someday I'm going to see a movie with Obi-Wan as a young Jedi, and the story of Luke's fighter pilot father, the one who died before he ever knew him, and I'll see the Clone Wars, with my own eyes. But its not going to come out for years and years and years, so long that, God, though I can't even imagine this yet, I might even be an adult by then.*

(And hey, what happened to that smarmy comedic tone, funny-man? How did this smart-ass essay get so maudlin and sentimental all of a sudden? Could it be that you were actually writing, for a second there, *without irony*?)

Go ahead and make fun of me all you want, but man, I gotta tell you, it freaks me out to even think about this, even now.



I finally did get those stupid toys in the mail (with the lightsabers that went up the inside of the arms—stupid!) but when I did get them, I felt the first twinge of what would eventually become a familiar feeling: the Inevitable Anticlimax. They were cool, obviously, but they somehow didn't feel like they'd been worth the wait. They couldn't have been; for little kids, a few months' wait means a huge percentage of their conscious life. I remember the chill I felt in my bones when I opened up my first pack of the new, second series of *Star Wars* cards, the ones with the red borders, and I realized that I was looking at number 237, and knew that there was no way I could ever possibly get all of these; it had taken me forever just to get the first sixty-three.

Thus began what would become a lifetime of disillusionment and disappointment with the aforementioned Vast Insidious Machineries of Consumerism. We're all familiar with this tired refrain by now—that cynical awareness of the Big Lie has become emblematic of, again, pretty much a whole generation, and the socio-cultural commentators say that The Ironic Voice has become the Dominant Mode of Cultural Discourse, and blah blah blah, and wow, they even go so far as to call this the Age of Irony (ooooh!)—the Jaded Age. You've heard all this before so there's no need to go into it; you know what I'm talking about. I myself have been plugging away in the comedy mines writing in The Ironic Voice for over a decade (and now, after twelve years, and even I can hardly believe this myself some days, I even make a *living* doing it) and the point being that at some stage *Star Wars* got replaced as the Official Touchstone of a Generation, as everybody with even half a clue knows, by Merrill Markoe and David Letterman and their mid-'80s paradigm-shifter *Late Night With* etc., and pretty soon everybody was thumbing their nose at the Vast Insidious Machineries of Consumerism (even the people, like Letterman, who were/are *inside* same), and where does that leave the thrilled little kid in his room, waiting for the Clone Wars movies to finally come out in twenty years?

You didn't exactly have to be a rocket scientist to figure out what was going to happen. As soon as the publicity engines started cranking out the news that *The Phantom Menace* was going to come out, for real this time, that it was actually being made (it had been such a long delay since the third sequel that most of us had given up on ever seeing it at all), I knew two things straight off: first, that this movie's release was going to be the biggest thing to come down the pike since, well, ever. And second: everybody was going to hate it.

How could they not? There was no way any *Star Wars* prequel could possibly live up to their expectations, and besides, the whole Big Prerelease Merchandise Roll-Out phenomenon, which had seemed so significant, so full of gravitas and awesome promise and all of that, when it was established by the first two sequels in '80 and '83, had become so commonplace that everything from That Forgotten Thing Where Jamie Lee Curtis Fights a Robot on a Boat to That One Michael Crichton Movie with the Super-Intelligent Apes That Nobody Went to See had a whole slew of consumer products to go with them (and yes, they did make action figures for those films, and the A-V Club editors at *The Onion*, proud owners of what must be by this point one of the most impressive collections of Extremely Lame Promotional Kitsch-Objects ever assembled in North America, have the little plastic Donald Sutherland as Half-Human/Half-Robot and Super-Intelliegent Talking Gorilla with Detachable Cyber-Backpack dolls to prove it). Not only were people no longer impressed by that sort of thing, they had actually grown to despise it with a passion. Still, for this one exception, people forgave the flash flood of Lucasfilm-franchised products that swamped retailers coast to coast—it seemed like *Star Wars* had, in some way, sort of *earned* it—and waited in line just to get the products, let alone see the actual film. Yet I knew in the long run it wouldn't work, and all those poor schmucks who bought all four covers of the hardcover edition of the novelization (I mean, really. Come on, guys. Summon up a little dignity.) would end up angry and hurt and disappointed—to use a word Christian Gore, cult filmmaker, editor of *Film Threat*, and complete *Star Wars*

nut, would eventually use in a vicious (and accurate) attack shortly after the film's release, *betrayed*. People actually felt personally betrayed, if you can imagine it, by *The Phantom Menace*, and whatever else might be said about that Jamie Lee Curtis/Robot/Boat movie, at least nobody ever accused it of betrayal.

And so, as the release date loomed closer and closer and the attendant anticipatory furor steadily built, I thought to myself, with increasing frustration: what to do about *The Phantom Menace* menace? It was clear that a gigantic, even epic, letdown was on the horizon; that there was no way that something as old-fashioned, as willingly, gleefully even, nonironic as a new *Star Wars* movie would match the late-'90s atmosphere of hypercritical, media-savvy, self-aware yadda yadda yadda; that there would be no place for Space Opera Nonsense in the embittered zeitgeist of the Jaded Age. What had, in 1977, been an a priori given of Cool would become, in 1999, an equivalent a priori given of Anticool. What I finally decided (after what, okay, I'll admit, was probably way too much thinking—go ahead, make fun of me) was this:

I constructed an argument that held it didn't make any sense—that it was beside the point—to view the prerelease hype, or the subsequent letdown, or even the content of the upcoming film itself, with any sort of ironic distance or critical awareness at all. In other words, it didn't matter that Lucas was only going to give us a Big Dumb Movie About Space Wizards, because *that's all he ever wanted to give us in the first place*. In other words, it seemed stupid to let my hypercritical self-awareness blah blah blah get in the way of my having a good time. That's probably not such good advice all the time, because after all, I could make that same argument about the Jamie Lee Curtis/Robot/Boat movie, and everything else on the big empty plate the Vast Insidious Machineries of Consumerism keep serving up time and time again, and I'd be a simp to do so. But this case was different. I decided I was going all-out for this one—despite the palpably looming Inevitable Anticlimax I was going to cast caution to the wind, leap willfully into the abyss, and fully Geek Out for *The Phantom Menace*. In other words, like one of

those full-grown men dressed up, in public, like a freakin' Jedi Knight, for crying out loud, I decided to *commit*.

And so that's what I did. I'll probably never be allowed to live it down for as long as I live.

This decision—embarrassing as it may have been and as dumb as it made me look in front of my friends, who naturally hated the film, and who, again naturally, thought I was out of my mind for continuing to insist, against all logic, that it was cool—was nevertheless sound, and I stand by it. The reasoning was simple: there's nothing wrong with a Big Dumb Movie About Space Wizards, even if it's a bad movie, because its supposed to be that way—because it's like that *on purpose*. Why was the original *Star Wars* so great in the first place? Because of the script, or the mechanics of the plot, or Marcia Lucas's editing? We were kids, for chrissakes, we weren't film buffs . . . there was, and there *still* is, no *point* in analyzing the movie on the basis of its merits *as a film*. The reason it was so great was that it had a Pirate in it, and a Princess, and Gunslingers, and WWII-movie-style Fighter Plane Dogfights, and yes, Space Wizards. You want to judge the original *Star Wars* movies on their merits as actual films, you run into a wall really quick—yes, they are awesome movies, without question, no argument there, but don't kid yourself that they somehow aren't *bad* movies as well. Think about it: the just-ludicrous-beyond-belief *lame* humor (come on, that corny-ass “Nerf herder” banter between Han and Leia where she calls him a whole string of insulting adjectives, one of which is “scruffy-looking,” and then he responds with “who's scruffy-looking?” Puh-leeze!), the ham-handed, plothole-ridden storytelling (oh, yeah, Luke gets all his Jedi training from Yoda in parallel-time with the *Millennium Falcon*'s extended chase scene to Bespin? What, were they chased for months, or did he get trained in hours?), the terrible, terrible acting (as Pauline Kael said in her 1977 review of the original, “you never catch the actors acting badly deliberately, they just *seem* to be bad actors”), the cloying

cuteness (I don't even want to go into this one), and on and on ad nauseam.

The fact is, *all* the arguments that stand against *The Phantom Menace* (and Lord knows, there are many) can be made against any one of the original films, but there's no reason to make them, because that would be *beside the whole friggin' point of the movies in the first place*, which is that Lucas, after doing his Orwellian-Dystopia Serious Statement About Society Movie just out of film school (*THX-1138*, which is a *great* Orwellian-Dystopia Serious Statement About Society Movie, by the way) and his subsequent Retro-Adolescent Coming-of-Age Movie (*American Graffiti*, which is not as good as *THX-1138* but is a pretty great Retro-Adolescent Coming-of-Age Movie nonetheless, especially in the subplot about trying to find Wolfman Jack), was tired of all this artistic filmic film-talk and was trying to get back to the whole reason he fell in love with the movies to begin with: yes, Space Opera Nonsense, in the form of the Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers and *Tom Corbett Space Cadet* serials *he* loved when *he* was a little kid, and have you ever seen one of *those* things? They're *terrible*! It doesn't matter though, because they're not supposed to not be terrible, they're just supposed to be cool. And guess what? They are, and Lucas doesn't need to justify this: for him, it is just Known.

That's why when Lucas, in interviews, dismisses the criticisms of *The Phantom Menace* (and surely the same criticisms are on the horizon for *Attack of the Clones*, and he will no doubt have the same reaction then) by saying he doesn't care, they said the same things about all the other movies too, well, it may seem as if he could not possibly be any further out to lunch, but the thing is, get this: he's not delusional, he's not lying, and he's not just making a misguided attempt to rationalize his way out of admitting he fucked up, because, as hard as it may be to believe, *he's not wrong*. He's absolutely correct in dismissing his critics, because they did say all those things about the original films, and the whole Inevitable Anticlimax notwithstanding, Lucas was right!

So, after mulling all of these contradictions over in my mind for

the few years it took between Lucasfilm announcing the pre-production of the megaprequels and finally releasing *Episode I*, I arrived at the conclusion that the proper response to the question on everybody's lips—"Yeah, I can't wait, but what if it's bad?"—was (and this was my Official Stated Position on the matter):

"I don't care how bad it turns out to be. I've been waiting to see it since I was eight, and as long as it has Space Wizards in it, I'm going to love this movie with all my heart."

Because ultimately, to the little kid in his room, waiting for the Clone Wars movies to come out in twenty years was just about as elusive a fantasy as actually *being* a Pirate, or a Princess, or a Cowboy, or a Space Wizard, it was just about equally removed from reality. Only there was a difference: unlike all those other childhood fantasies (who among us ever did get to really *be* a Pirate, or a Princess, or a Cowboy, when we grew up?) the getting-to-finally-see-the-Clone-Wars fantasy, as it turned out, was something that *was actually going to come true*.

At least, that's what I convinced myself of in the spring of 1999. How, after all this thinking about what to do, I somehow ended up talking myself into the extremely embarrassing position of having to defend what just about everybody on Earth has by now dismissed as one of the worst movies ever made, I may never fully understand. Looking back on it now, I realize I dealt with the problem like the guy in *The Caine Mutiny* who aims the ship directly at the heart of the hurricane. Was I right to do what I did? Well, the argument seemed sound at the time, and yes, I stuck to my guns on it. At least give me credit for that, even if it did get me ending up looking about as stupid as, um, er, well, as one of those full-grown men dressed up like a Jedi Knight. I've got to admit though, even with a fully thought-out defense ahead of time, the reality of the Inevitable Anticlimax strained the credibility of my position way, way beyond even the worst of my worst-case scenario predictions. I guess if one is foolhardy enough to try and pit himself against an

entire zeitgeist like that, it's only to be expected that you're gonna get your ass kicked—it's sort of a Captain Ahab versus the Whale That Cannot Be Defeated Because It Symbolizes Nature situation—but as prepared as I was to defend my decision, even I had a hard time dealing with the aftermath once I saw a twenty-five-foot moving and talking image of Jar Jar fucking Binks for the first time.

Though it seems clear that no discussion of *The Phantom Menace* would be complete without it, I hesitate to even mention the name Jar Jar Binks at all, if only out of an overwhelming desire on my part to never again, for the rest of my life, have to think about the fact that he exists. But, of course he does, and there is nothing any of us can do to change that. He is part of the permanent record of our culture now, and it may be decades before his grinning, hideous visage is erased from the collective unconsciousness. What sadistic fever-dream dredged him up from Lucas's mind to be created is thankfully beyond the power of any but the Vaunted Auteur himself to know. The larger question of why anyone would want to go that extra step and actually unleash this behemoth upon an unsuspecting and trusting public is beyond all rational consideration.

Amazingly, not only does Lucas *not admit to this day* that Jar Jar Binks is, to put it in the most polite possible terms, the shall we say weakest element of the first *Star Wars* episode, he goes on, unbelievably, to actually cite Jar Jar as the one thing that he is the *most proud of* in the whole film. "Why?" you ask, aghast? Because he is the first completely digital construct ever to appear as a main character in a major motion picture, and as such, he represents (I'm saying that Lucas thinks this, not me) the most significant contribution that Lucas has yet made to the craft of filmmaking, the highest technical achievement so far, the greatest innovation: His Proudest Moment.

Well, I guess Lucas can go ahead and continue thinking that if he wants. Me, myself personally, I've typed the name "Jar Jar Binks" only three times so far (four counting that last one) and I've

already done it more times than I can bear. Therefore, I will henceforth refer to him instead only as He Who Shall Not Be Named (HWSNBN for short). Why the people at Lucasfilm felt they needed a commercially accessible, marketable character like HWSNBN in the movie, presumably for the really small, small kids—like age two, maybe—to relate to, I have no idea: they already had two Rosencrantz and Guildenstern comic relief characters, the droids, and in case they were worried about not hitting the Teletubbies crowd, maybe somebody could have reminded them that one of these droids already speaks in bip-bop-beep baby talk. Ultimately, it's not that the character design and animation of HWSNBN are even all that bad, really. With a different voice and a completely new set of dialogue and actions, he could have been just fine. What's so atrociously, unwatchably cringe-worthy about him is his personality: a grotesque caricature of marketability, an UberBarney with the Voice from Beyond Elmo. Actor Ahmed Best, who is said to have pursued the role with great fervor, presumably thought that this part was going to be his ticket to immortality. The universal response to the character has been so vehement, virulent, and vitriolic, however, that he may be better off removing it from his résumé entirely, leaving a gaping hole in his job history right after the part about the off-Broadway sensation *Stomp*.

This shambling, misshapen Lovecraftian vision has been the bane of my existence since his arrival on this planet, first in movie form, and then in his far more nightmarish, real-life, *true* form: as merchandise.

For that summer, everywhere you went across these United States, HWSNBN was there. I know this because my girlfriend and I went on a long road trip that year, no matter what state we were in, any time we stopped the car, wherever we looked, we saw HWSNBN looking back at us, in life-size cardboard cutout form, a friendly smile on his face gesturing with outstretched flipper/paw toward a conveniently located display case of Pepsi products, as if to say "Wah-na so-da?" He was the personalized embodiment of the Vast Insidious Machineries of Consumerism, he was the

symbol of everything we'd grown to despise about our commercial society made CGI flesh, and, in that, perhaps the argument could be made that *The Phantom Menace* was actually the most culturally relevant of the all the *Star Wars* films, because it is the failure of these Machineries to deliver on their empty promises, more so than said promises themselves, that our culture is really all about. That, of course, more so than his annoying cuteness or his insipid voice, was the most depressing thing about him.

With this in mind, I might have at least found some consolation in watching these machineries sputter and falter, as the full economic impact of the Inevitable Anticlimax slowly became more and more apparent following the movie's launch. Companies lost fortunes as books and toys that had been expensively licensed from Lucasfilm piled up unsold in stores for months on end. The Taco Bell promotion was reportedly a record setter for the least successful fast-food promotion in fast-food history, and merchandising deals of every stripe fared little better. Though the film itself, on the strength of its hype and despite the negative reaction it got from just about the whole country, still managed to become the fourth-highest box office moneymaker in movie history, the implosion of the merchandising bubble told the true story. I think it is worth mentioning that, as of this writing, in March of 2002, a full three years since the post-*Phantom Menace* merchandise implosion, with the trailers for *Episode II* already in theaters (and those same *Star Wars* geeks who professed to hate the new movie with every fiber of their being currently the *same people* who are getting all excited about it), this long after the fact, I *still*, when I went down to my local drugstore to buy a new toothbrush last week, found a HWSNBN toothbrush staring back at me from the shelf: that's a true story.

Sadly, I was unable to take any pleasure in this (our nation taking collective revenge upon HWSNBN's smug, sardonic face by *not* buying him) because the sudden, drastic drop in the cost of all this crap (90% Off! Everything Must Go!) made it instantly affordable for seemingly everyone I knew—knowing as they did that I had

signed on whole hog and gone all out for *The Phantom Menace* and had stubbornly refused to back down despite all evidence to the contrary, and who, of course, wanted to give me as much shit as humanly possible about my doing so—to buy said crap for me, as humiliating gag gifts, in vast quantities, at dollar-store prices, for the next couple of years. I soon had more *Star Wars Episode I* bull-shit heaped on me, with sarcastic smiles and knowing explanations of “I knew you liked this stuff, it was only two dollars and sixty cents, can you believe it?” than any mortal man deserves. I had Anakin Skywalker cereal bowls. I had Queen Amidala-shaped soap. I had little spiral notepads with Sebulba on them, and I had them all by the ton. I had never been so mortified in all my days. But most of all, I had reams and reams of HWSNBNs—on stickers, bean bag toys, throw pillows, towels, posters, pencils, and shoelaces—my friends cut out his picture from the countless ads he appeared in and taped them to my walls, my desk, my computer, so I could never get away from his countless, ubiquitous faces—each one looking back at my stubborn support for *Episode I* with a silent, grinning rebuke.

I still have all this crap, by the way. It overflows bags and boxes in my closets.

You want it? No? That’s what I figured: I can’t unload this shit on anybody.

So then anyway, was it worth it? I don’t mean for the nation (for the nation, no, obviously not worth it), but for me: in the face of that silent rebuke, did my argument stand up? I’m still not sure about that one: sometimes I think so, and other times not. I’d never been able to indulge in multiple viewings of *Star Wars* as a kid, and now, at thirty, I had a job, my rent was paid, and the theater showing *The Phantom Menace* was only a two-minute walk down the street from where I worked. I saw the movie at least eight times that summer, and I’ve seen it on video and DVD a couple times since, so that means that all in all I have, voluntarily and of my own

free will, sat through *Star Wars Episode I* probably a good dozen times at least. Each time, the two contradictory halves of my own personal take on the film battled, like the light and dark sides of the Force, in my neurotic little media-addled head. But anyway, for what its worth, here stands my defense of *The Phantom Menace*, a movie that I am the only person I know of who professes to actually like; even, on some level, to sort of deeply love. Go ahead and make fun of me all you want, because believe me, I've heard it all before. But here's the thing:

It still seems to me that no matter what one may say, if you're honest with yourself, and accept the movie on its own terms (which is to say, on the same level as you took in the Space Opera Nonsense that so stirred you as a kid) you cannot deny that *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* has elements in it that are as cool or cooler than anything we've seen in any of the *Star Wars* movies period. Ask yourself, "Would I have liked this movie if I got to see it when I was eight?"—not if you were eight years old in 1999 (in 1999 the Place To Be was definitely not eight years old. I can't imagine an eight-year-old of today being affected in anywhere near the same way by the *Star Wars* mythos as we all were back in 1977, because they've seen all this sort of stuff before, and back then, we hadn't. In 1999, the Place To Be was fourteen years old, and male, and watching *The Matrix*, which is, come to think of it, another example of just what I'm talking about, an undeniably *bad* movie, a B movie, a cheesy-as-hell movie by any kind of Informed Film Criticism standards, but an undeniably *awesome* one nonetheless) but rather if you were eight years old *again*, back then, in that fairy-tale summer. If you say no, I say you're lying.

What about Senator Palpatine? The Emperor is one of the very greatest characters in the *Star Wars* mythos (and for all the bitching the purists do about *Return of the Jedi* because of all those horrible friggin' Ewoks, we should remember that of the whole first trilogy, the Emperor was only in the last one), brilliantly played by Ian McDiarmid in what I would argue is the best performance of any in the series; his every move, gesture, and weird-half-speech-

impediment-ish pronunciation oozing *pure evil*. As an audience we react to the Emperor with visceral repulsion, mirroring the way people naturally react to the palpable presence of actual evil: our skin crawls at the sight of him. He is just *awesome*, and in *Episode I* we get to watch him, the titular menace, at his most loathsome: bald-facedly lying to those who trust him (telling the Queen's court, "The negotiations haven't started? But how can that be true? I have assurances from the Chancellor that the Ambassadors have arrived," when we just saw him, not two minutes before, in his Sith Lord alter ego, ordering their *deaths*) and working his deceitful machinations behind the scenes. ("The Council will appoint a new Chancellor . . . a *strong* Chancellor.") No? What about that great moment (twisting those around him to make them more evil than they already are) when the Trade Federation Viceroy says to him "But Lord Sidious . . . is that . . . *legal*?" and he replies with sheer hatred in his voice—just so *evil!*—"I will *make* it legal!"

No? Not buying this? Okay, what about Queen Amidala, striding forward to address the Galactic Congress with "I was not elected to watch my people suffer and die while you discuss this invasion in a committee!" Or that beautiful shot of her standing contemplatively at the Theed Palace window, her head sorrowfully lowered as she watches the occupational force seize the city square? Like her daughter Princess Leia, she functions as a damsel-in-distress for the plot purposes of fairy-tale archetypes, but she is a super-bad-ass female heroine as well, brandishing a laser blaster shoulder-to-shoulder alongside frontline infantry soldiers, while in other scenes maintaining a regal aura of nobility and leadership with a painted face as immobile, formal, and dignified as a feudal Japanese noblewoman. And she's only fourteen! What about that close-up of her, saying with doomed idealism, in stern, measured tones, "I will not condone a course of action that will lead us to war." That alone makes the film worth seeing again!

No? Okay, what about Anakin Skywalker, eight years of age, looking Qui-Gon in the eye after being told that pod-racing is

dangerous, and saying, with the pride that will eventually be his downfall into darkness, "I'm the only human who can do it." Just try telling me that's not awesome! Or the scene where he openly hits on the Queen, calling her one of the most beautiful creatures in the universe? Princess Leia was one of my first crushes (after the scantily clad Caroline Munro in the awesome Ray Harryhausen flick *The Golden Voyage of Sinbad*) and it's strange to remember that presexual version of desire, when you were awed by and drawn to physical beauty, aching for the unapproachable object of your affections from the impossible distance of being too young, but you didn't fantasize about sex, you just wanted to *marry* them. (I had a whole new layer added to this early Princess Leia fantasy-imprint in my early twenties, when I learned that, in real life, in 1977 Carrie Fisher was a nineteen-year-old hard-partying Hollywood Wild Child who, when told by Lucas she had to tape her breasts down to keep them from jiggling too much on the set, rebelled by starting a tradition, at the end of each shooting day, of letting a different guy from the crew *rip the tape off*—hoo-mama, help me.) And it is that exact feeling of childhood longing that's evoked by Anakin's little-boy crush on Padme, the handmaiden that he is not yet aware is not only a queen, but also the future mother of his son and daughter.

No? Well, what about the fact that she's, apparently, also his future *victim*, come to think of it (since there's no Queen Amidala still around in old age at the start of *Episode IV*), and that is, after all, the film's central conceit: that we, the viewer, already *know* that this boy is doomed to be the greatest villain in the universe, that he will grow up to cut off his son's hand, to blow up his daughter's adopted planet, that the Good Space Wizards are going to be wiped out, and the Evil Space Wizard, the central character of it all, will triumph—and yet, that he will ultimately be redeemed at the very end—*awesome!* Seriously, you've got to admit that with all these doubling-back narrative structural effects, Lucas is, in some ways, getting at the very heart of something about those childhood fantasies, and what it's like to grow up from them, and then look

back on them after having grown up; on innocence, and experience, and the difference. You can't admit that at the very least that's *kind of* cool? No? Come on, you're sort of starting to piss me off now.

Okay then, well what about the scene there at the very end, where the Queen and the Jedis are storming the Palace, and the hangar bay door opens, and the music kicks in, with as awesome a theme as John Williams ever wrote, and a whole classical chorus of voices starts belting out *ancient Sanskrit* for chrissakes—to reveal Darth Maul, Lord of the Sith, in all his terrible splendor, and the three Force-wielding principles silently drop their outer robes to the floor, and the stage is set for what can only be described, unquestionably, indisputably, as the greatest lightsaber fight, *by far*, that *anybody's* ever seen? Jesus, it makes all the other lightsaber battles, thrilling as they were at the time, nothing less than excruciatingly boring to watch now by comparison, that's how fucking great it is, with Darth Maul simultaneously attacking two full-on prime-of-their-lives Jedi Knights, all three of them spinning and flipping in superhuman leaps and parries and *Jesus*—when Obi-Wan finally gets out from behind the force field, after helplessly watching his Master slaughtered before his eyes, and he runs forward into the fray and just busts out *swinging*, and you just want to stand up in your seat and go *yeah!*—like people did at the end of the first trilogy when Vader grabs the Emperor and lifts him above the edge of the pit and they stood up and yelled *throw him over!*—and I mean, *man*, it just makes you want to name your *kid* Obi-Wan, if you had a kid, it's so cool. Look me in the face and tell me you're gonna deny that's awesome! Seriously! You don't think so? Really? You don't think that moment, that supreme awesome moment of Space Opera Nonsense Writ Larger Than Large (and hey, there's that nonironic tone again, funnyman), when the Good Space Wizard takes on the Bad Space Wizard with total, unstoppable, righteous *fury*, is worth getting excited enough about to want to see again and again?

No? Well, fuck you then! The hell with you if you can't set aside

your self-awareness long enough to embrace that moment! What good does it do anybody not to allow yourself to appreciate something that life-affirming?

Fuck you and your smartass ironic distance! What about that little kid in his room, so long ago, waiting for his chance to see the Clone Wars movies someday! What about him, huh? Don't his feelings matter at all, you cynical bastards? All you sons of bitches can kiss my ass! And while you're at it, I suppose this is as good a time as any to say, yeah, by the way, that was *me* in the homemade Jedi Knight costume on opening weekend, motherfuckers, and yeah, I had one of those toy lightsabers in my belt, and yeah, I knew I looked stupid, but you know what, I didn't care, and I'm not ashamed, and fuck you if you can't take a non-joke. Picture me wearing it now, why don't you, grabbing my nutsack and flipping you the bird.

Okay, so I'm a little defensive about this.

After waiting for more than twenty years, I finally saw *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* at a beautiful gigantic old theater called the Orpheum, on State Street in Madison, Wisconsin. The theater had been struggling financially and was kind of dilapidated (it was built before movies originally, for touring stage acts and vaudeville and the like) and had almost got converted and remodeled into something strange and modern and horrible but had just, at that point in time, been saved by a community outreach campaign and a guy who came in and bought it at the last minute to preserve it and restore it to the way it was. He had been working hard to get the restorations done in time for the opening, had put in new seats and restored the vending area and had acquired a brand-new state-of-the-art THX sound system (these were required for any theater that wanted to show the film), and so the whole mood surrounding the theater was optimistic and hopeful in that rare way that sometimes happens.

The theater, because it was originally intended as a stage theater,

sat way more people than any movie house could ever expect to draw. It was huge, with seventeen hundred seats, and it was therefore never full, which meant that no matter how popular a movie was, you could always see it if it was playing there, because it would never sell out, but they completely filled it all the way up that night, even the huge and grand old balcony, packing them in to the rafters. For the *Star Wars* premiere, all the tickets were sold in advance, and they sold out a week ahead of time at all the other theaters in town, and people had to wait in line for them, and even then they sometimes couldn't get a ticket, but the situation at the Orpheum was perfect because it was so big they still had tickets available right up until the showing itself, so nobody had to wait in line.

They chose to anyway. There was a carnival atmosphere in the street outside for hours before the first showing, which was at midnight on opening day. I could hear the chatter and laughter and crowd noises from where the old offices of *The Onion* were, a block away from The Orpheum, before we moved to New York. I had gathered with a large group of friends and coworkers who were all going to see the movie together that night and, having changed into my Jedi Knight outfit, I was swinging around the really cool lightsaber I bought earlier that week at Toys-"R"-Us—much cooler than any of the versions available to me when I was a kid, this one actually made the awesome lightsaber humming sound when you turned it on, and was pressure sensitive, so that when it connected with something, it made the sound effects of a lightsaber clash. The writers' room in the old offices was filled, like most comedy staffers' rooms, with a bunch of goofy and offensive shit—dumb posters people had defaced to comic effect, a whole wall of dumb pseudo-humorous monkey photos we called "The Wall of Chimp," funny clippings from insipid celebrity-profile magazines, and other detritus of the Jaded Age—one of which was a child's baby doll dressed in a bunny costume that some wiseacre or other had hung from the ceiling by a noose. Swinging the lightsaber at it, I kept sending the fake dead baby swinging in wide arcs and parabolas

around the room. Though I knew in the back of my mind that the Inevitable Anticlimax was just around the corner, I was in great spirits.

I'd been thinking about maybe wearing Jedi Knight robes ever since someone had pointed out that I had the same hair and beard as Liam Neeson wore in the prequel and put the idea in my head. Finally I figured, what the hell, there's no point in being self-conscious about looking stupid—*come on man, show some balls*. Since the Inevitable Anticlimax was on the way, I'd end up getting made fun of anyway, so I guess I figured that hey, maybe just going all-out into uncoolness, for this one occasion, would be almost sort of punk rock or something. My girlfriend's sister Pam, who's a home economics teacher, *and a damn good one*, had sewn it for me, so it was awesome-looking. Even better, my roommate at the time, Jeffrey, decided he was going in costume too, but he wore a borrowed *Star Trek: The Next Generation* uniform (Jeffrey is not a *Star Trek* geek, he just thought it'd be funny) and just *confused and bothered* people: now *that* was punk rock.

When we finally went down and joined the line, there was a brief moment of panic as a policeman, apparently worried that the horseplay in the crowd was getting out of hand, started striding over to us to tell us to behave, but luckily my coworker John, in his usual wiseass mode, defused the situation by singing the Darth Vader "Imperial March" theme as the cop approached, drawing a huge laugh from the crowd as others took up the refrain and sang along and effectively robbing the policeman of any authority he might have otherwise commanded. People passed food and beverages around; a few people, as they always are in Madison, were passing joints. It was a beautiful, temperate spring night and the weather was perfect, and everybody was having a great time, and the weird thing is: almost all of the people there, really, were not *Star Wars* geeks either (although there was a comparatively small contingent of them—you could sort of, um, really easily tell which ones were), mostly they were all just a really big crowd of former eight-year-olds like me.

At some point, the local news showed up. Because I was wearing a costume, a reporter singled me out and asked, "Why are you wearing that?" I was speechless. I had no real answer prepared. I was not the sort of person who would ever normally do stuff like this, so I was unable to explain why this one night I had. I thought about it, and realized that although I am not really a *Star Wars* geek (at least not in the sense that most people take it to mean) I certainly could relate to the idea of being a Normal Regular geek, if by "Normal Regular geek" you mean "guy who didn't really fit in in junior high, and ended up spending a lot of time alone in his room, looking at *Mad* magazine, watching movies, drawing cartoons, and reading books," which is what I, anyway, would take it to mean. So after a brief pause, I said, "Why do you think? Because I'm a big freakin' geek! This is our day. Geek nation!" and then I turned around to the people standing behind me and yelled "Geek nation!" and they all started yelling it too. I don't think the reporter understood what we were trying to say.

I am not making this up.

At the last minute, I spotted my friend Rob, who was also not a *Star Wars* geek, he was a stoner musician guy who played in a surf rock outfit in town, but had been enough of a lifelong *Star Wars* fan to name his band "The Mandalorians" and actually get Boba Fett's shoulder insignia tattooed on his own shoulder. I waved him over and he came with us as we made our way into the huge theater for the show. I knew him from around town as kind of a tough-guy rocker type, but his face, as we all sat there, was lit up with an expression of pure little-kid delight. As the crowd waited for the movie to start, shouting out wisecracks, I realized that something strange was happening. As often happens with excited crowds of that size, it had spontaneously burst into a kind of tribal chant-type thing. Normally, I never experience this, because I don't go to any of the places where crowds that large usually form—I'm not a sports fan, so I don't go to ball games; I'm not a hippie, so I don't go to Phish shows; I'm not a Republican, so I don't go to political conventions. I'm usually always on the outside of crowds that

large, living in the Jaded Age. But then the chant changed, and I realized they were all singing the Main Title Theme from *Star Wars* and I thought *Oh my God, man . . . I can't believe this is actually happening, for real.*

At some point some joker stepped out to introduce the film and yelled, "Are you ready to see *Star Wars*?" and Jeffrey stood up and said, "I thought this was gonna be *Star Trek*!" and that got a big laugh. And then the lights went down and everybody cheered, and the previews came on and they booed, and the 20th Century Fox logo came up and they cheered, and the Lucasfilm logo came up and everybody cheered again. And then, the words "A long time ago," etc. came up, and everybody went "Shhhh! Shh!" until the whole place, all seventeen hundred of them, was totally, and completely silent.

I knew the Inevitable Anticimax part was coming, and that sort of made me sad, but in the meantime, there was still this. That coming disappointment would be the biggest impact on our collective cultural consciousness until a year and a half later, election night 2000, which was really going to freak everybody out, until of course the following autumn after that, which was *really* going to, and this, right now, was sort of the Last Perfect Moment before all the bad stuff started to go down. And go ahead and make fun of me all you want, because I've heard it all before, but here's the thing: then there was a sudden blast of brass fanfare, exactly like the one we all knew by heart, and the screen filled with light, and from the foundations to the roof the building shook as the whole place went absolutely apeshit.

STAR WARS TALE

KATE BERNHEIMER

Once there was a little girl and an older sister, and they had this game they played, and in the game they played Princess Leia and Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker. The younger sister played Princess Leia and the older sister played Darth Vader and Luke Skywalker. This all took place in the kitchen, papered metallic silver with yellow flowers.

First the sister who played Princess Leia rolled her hair into balls on the sides of her head and was locked in the pantry, but as the pantry didn't really lock it was pretend-locked by the other sister who, at the time in the game when the locking took place, played Darth Vader. The Darth Vader sister had a black plastic garbage bag over her shoulders like a cape and spoke with a raspy voice. This Darth Vader sister would say, "You must be locked inside this soundproof room because you were very, very bad and you will never, ever get to see the handsome Luke Skywalker again." And always the Darth Vader sister would threaten the Princess Leia sister with "beating, rape, and other forms of torture."

While threatening Princess Leia, the Darth Vader sister would sometimes close herself into the pantry too. She would stretch her

arms imposingly across the door. This was a cue for the Princess Leia sister to throw her arms around the Darth Vader sister and cling to her in thrilled terror. Then the Darth Vader sister would tilt back her head and cackle in the raspy voice. She'd leave the pantry, fake-locking the door. Back in the kitchen she would pretend to pluck a yellow flower from the papered walls and stomp on its bloom. Rasping, she'd cackle again.

Now the sister playing Princess Leia became terrified, and screamed "Help! Help me Luke!" and the sister who was playing Luke Skywalker, who had just been playing Darth Vader, would quickly, quickly remove the garbage-bag cape from her shoulders and put on a white shirt of the father's (which the mother used for baking) and say, in a voice full of passion, "Princess Leia!" But because the pantry was sealed off from sound, being "soundproof," Princess Leia couldn't hear Luke Skywalker, even though Luke Skywalker out in the kitchen could hear Princess Leia calling for him. "Help! Help me Luke," Princess Leia sobbed again and again. Yet Luke Skywalker, abjectly, only could listen.

Pacing the kitchen, Luke would wave his arms in their long white sleeves to the rhythm of Leia's cries. That he could hear her at all was an auditory curiosity, a miracle of sorts, a fatal glitch Darth Vader had not predicted when he had locked the Princess in the room. At this very moment in the crisis, each and every time the game was played, Luke could hear Leia cry for help from inside the soundproof room. In fact the game hinged on his hearing her. How else would he know to promise to save her from rape, beating, and other forms of torture?

Yet as Princess Leia could not hear Luke from inside the pantry, telling her how he would save her (which would prove that he loved her), Luke Skywalker would make tapes for her to listen to on a cassette recorder. He would speak into the microphone as he paced around the silver kitchen professing his "deep and unfathomable love for you, Princess Leia, my only sister—I mean lover—who is locked away right now and can never hear my voice again and might be beaten, raped, or tortured!" He would then rewind to

the beginning of his message and open the door to the soundproof room, hand Princess Leia the cassette recorder and slam the door shut again, hard. The Luke Skywalker sister often forgot whether to be tender or mean, having to juggle so many roles.

Princess Leia, clutching the machine to her chest, would hit "play," listen to his message, and then record one of her own. She whispered close to the machine. "Luke Skywalker, I love you with all my heart, all my heart, you are my one and only lover and I will love you for all time even from inside this soundproof room in which the wicked Darth Vader has locked me for all time, and where I will be punished again and again in so many unspeakable ways." She would attach a yellow flower from the wallpaper to her message, placing the flower on the recorder with care. After rewinding meticulously to the beginning of her message, Princess Leia would open the door and hand the recorder to Luke. Sniffing the flower with great fervor, the young Luke would cry.

So it continued along. Back and forth Luke and Leia would pass the recorder and profess their love with only occasional interruptions by a garbage-bagged Darth and his threats of beating and rape. And though it made the sisters glow, no one ever got saved.

A STAR WARS MISCELLANY:

Extracts Culled from Various Media

COMPILED BY AIMEE AGRESTI

In *Star Wars*, there's a scene in which R2-D2 spews out a three-dimensional image of Princess Leia into the middle of the room. "Unfortunately, it doesn't work that way," says Mr. Benton, one of the foremost researchers in the field. "I'm amazed at how even scientists who should know better get angry when they are told we can't violate the simple rules of light moving in straight lines. You can't spit out light and have it turn around without a reflector."

—Steve Benton, chief holographic researcher for Polaroid Corp., in the article "Holography Remains Elusive Dream," Walter Immen, *Globe and Mail* 12/01/1980

Yes, the *Star Wars* gang has released its very own Christmas album, entitled *Christmas in the Stars*. It features such standard fare as "Sleigh Ride" and "'Twas the Night before Christmas," as well as a few cosmic extras such as "Christmas in the Stars." Darth Vader would absolutely hate it.

—"Spaced-out Yule from C-3PO & Co.," *Globe and Mail* 11/19/1980
(*I wonder if this artifact is still in the "Bible"?—Ed.*)

In nooks and corners, the author may be glimpsed striking a rich variety of pompous attitudes, interlarding the narratives with a McInerney-esque and rather gratuitous litany of hipness-establishing buzz words (Burberry, *Star Wars*, Jerry Falwell; MOMA, Karen Black, the Food Emporium, Cadillac Broughams [in two stories], the New York Helmsley Hotel, et al.).

—Review of Harlan Ellison book *Angry Candy*, Mitch Berman,
Los Angeles Times 01/01/1989

DIRTY ROTTEN SCOUNDRELS—A long time ago, before *Star Wars* brought about the age of technology and *National Lampoon's Animal House* brought about the age of bathroom humor, comedies were almost always elegant.

—“Top Attractions,” Philip Wuntch, *Dallas Morning News*, 12/30/1988,

Henry Kurtz (director of the collectibles department at the Phillips auction gallery in Manhattan): If I had a warehouse, I would start stocking Michael Jackson, Cher, and Bruce Springsteen memorabilia; *Star Wars* toys, particularly the original series of Empire commandos and Darth Vader figures; E.T. toys, and any personal items from entertainment or sports celebrities.

—“Spotting the Icons of the '80s: Experts tell what
will show future generations the way we were,”

Patricia Leigh Brown, *Dallas Morning News* 12/20/1988

John Remillard is wearing the kind of headset used by telephone operators. He's sitting at a table that holds what looks like an ordinary personal computer, which is hooked up to an electronic device the size of a stereo tuner. He speaks into the tiny microphone that is an inch from his mouth and attached to the headset. “Four,” he says. He presses a key on the computer keyboard and a large orange circle appears on the computer screen. Underneath the circle is the word . . . “four.” Remillard beams. . . . But people who have watched C-3PO exchange witticisms with Luke Skywalker and his pals on the silver screen will find it hard to get

excited by hearing Remillard say "four" and watching the word pop up on a computer screen.

—"Say Hello to a 'True' Talking Computer,"
Paul Galloway, *Chicago Tribune* 12/18/1988

"You have to parody movies at just the point where they finish making them. We didn't think it was a good idea to do another horror-movie spoof, for instance, because they aren't taken that seriously any more. The same with sci-fi. It was Mel Brooks' intention to spoof *Star Wars* in *Spaceballs*. But *Star Wars* was already a spoof."—David Zucker, director.

—"The 'Naked' Guys: Exposing a trio of film makers who take spoofs quite seriously," Jay Carr, *Boston Globe* 12/12/1988

[Charles] Prosek's own collection has 10,000 troops featuring armies from the Egyptian, Assyrian, Greek, Persian, Carthage, Roman, English Civil, Hungarian, Renaissance, Mexican-American, American Revolutionary and assorted colonial wars and World War II. This is only a small sample of what's available from ancient wars all the way up to *Star Wars*, he said.

—"This Is War! And the Battleground Is Prosek's,"
S. R. Carroll, *Chicago Tribune* 12/11/1988

Byrne Piven, who plays Macbeth and directs *Macbeth*, writes in a program note that the germ of an idea for this staging came to him three years ago when he saw a university production of *Julius Caesar* that was set on another planet. Another source of inspiration is surely *Star Wars*, with Macbeth as Darth Vader and Macduff as a more adult Luke Skywalker who definitely has The Force with him.

—"Piven 'Macbeth' Just Like Arousing Mad Maxbeth,"
Richard Christiansen, *Chicago Tribune* 11/11/1988

He's funny. He's weird. He's great. At least that's how students at H.E. Charles Middle School describe science teacher Tim Holt. . . .

Holt may tell about a little town. As he spins the yarn, the townspeople evolve into characters in the day's real lesson: the components and functions of microscopic cells. "Then they remember the point," Holt said. "You can't use boring stuff with them. They're used to special effects. They've been to *Star Wars*. It's got to be hands-on for these kids. They've got to touch it."

—"Teacher Makes Science Lively: Tim Holt piques seventh-graders' interest in funny ways," Jim Conley, *El Paso Times* 11/10/1988

What follows over the next three hours plus intermission is a highly technical, inside-joke-ridden, masterful performance. It is to product demonstrations what Vatican II was to church meetings. To reach the grasp of "mere mortals" who might have stumbled in amid the chosen, [Steve] Jobs invokes images as well as numbers and technology. He illustrates the power and precision and digital-sound quality of his NeXT computer by summoning up the sights and sounds of *Star Wars*, 2001: *A Space Odyssey*, John F. Kennedy, Martin Luther King Jr. and Moon-walking astronauts.

—"The Cult of Steve: All Hail the Prophet of the Personal Computer," Wes Smith, *Chicago Tribune* 10/23/1988

Today, our collective robotic fantasies are measured against the kindly androids R2-D2 and C-3PO, George Lucas' classic creations in *Star Wars*. Lucas was creating science fiction, but Engelberger's vision is for real. . . . Home robots, in contrast, while utilizing the technology, will be more anthropomorphic and voice-activated. Engelberger describes Homebot, visually, as a cross between R2-D2 and C-3PO. "It's gonna live in your home with you—it's got to be friendly."

—"At Home With Robots Experts Developing Kindly Androids That Will Dust, Scrub, Vacuum and, Yes, Even Do Windows," Series: Reshaping the Future, Connie Koenenn, *Los Angeles Times* 10/17/1988

In artists' renderings, it looks a bit like a spaceship that landed on the west side of downtown Houston. Actually, it's only the old

Albert Thomas Convention Center as it would look in 1992 if a redevelopment plan drafted by a team directed by *Star Wars* filmmaker George Lucas becomes reality. The city of Houston is negotiating with Houston-based Century Development Corp. and Lucas' Skywalker Development Co. to turn the Thomas center into a beehive of downtown nightlife, with restaurants, clubs, theaters and shops, similar to Dallas' West End MarketPlace.

—"Houston Seeks Livelier Nightlife: *Star Wars* creator offers 'bold idea' to boost downtown," Bruce Nichols,
Dallas Morning News 10/16/1988

Michael Kudesh keeps on his desk a few sets of clear Lucite balls. The customized balls are only used at special parties for play on the club's table—a sort of *Star Wars* model with stainless-steel rails.

—"Pool Is Cool Again 'It's Very Social, Very Sexy'—
and It's Going Downright Upscale All Over Town,"
Marla Donato, *Chicago Tribune* 10/05/1988

Chains . . . black sleeveless "Megadeath" T-shirts . . . leather pants . . . fish-net stockings . . . pink Tina Turner hair. . . As one sober hotel guest put it, the cocktail lounge at the Sheraton Universal on Saturday night looked like the bar scene from *Star Wars*.

—"Heavy Metal Rockers Say They Want More Respect,"
Dennis McDougal, *Los Angeles Times* 10/03/1988

Skeeter redesigned the console of its SK 2000 this year and the new design seems to make more efficient use of space. The boat still bears a striking resemblance to Luke Skywalker's hovercraft in the movie *Star Wars* but the 1,400-pound bass boat is selling as fast as Skeeter can turn them out.

—"Power Boating: Innovative designs cater to fishing, recreational needs,"
Ray Sasser, *Dallas Morning News* 09/22/1988

The front entrance is a *Star Wars* pergola framing a semicircular courtyard, beyond which stands an entry facade shaped like an

open book and inscribed with an American flag and an inspirational message from former Columbia University president Grayson Kirk.

—"Cool Schools: El Paso proves bright, fresh design doesn't have to cost a fortune," David Dillon, *Dallas Morning News* 09/18/1988

At its worst, the new *Ring* suffered from stylistic inconsistency, visual gimmickry, hectic, even distracting, dramatic choreography, and a frustrating vagueness of intention. When Kupfer and his designers appeared to run out of ideas, they simply filled the stage with *Star Wars*-style laser effects, or hauled out the smoke pots. Too often, what one saw confused, or, worse, contradicted, what one heard.

—"High-Tech Wagner: A Provocative New *Ring* Ignites Passions at Bayreuth," John von Rhein, *Chicago Tribune* 08/14/1988

"A lot of people want to know what our homes are going to be like in the year 2000," said Joy Schrage, a spokesman for the Michigan-based appliance firm. "I think many of us have watched too many *Star Wars* movies. We are not going to see any plastic bubble cities and space-age homes."

—"High Tech Finally Coming Home," Steve Brown, *Dallas Morning News* 09/28/1984

I think the reason the concept of the personal robot is so appealing is that too many people have seen *Star Wars* and have fallen in love with the idea of having a cute little robot to boss around. Indeed, the idea of a digital batman that makes your bed or consoles you when you're feeling down or fetches your slippers appeals to the part of us that wants to be pampered.

—"Personal Computers: Personal Robot: A Cute Idea, but No Cigar," Michael Schrage, *Washington Post* 09/24/1984

The scene was of innocence and fantasy, more Ringling Bros. than rock 'n' roll, more *Star Wars* than *Gimme Shelter*. Children tugged

their parents from one concession stand to another. A few fell asleep as the Jacksons shifted from funk to lullaby.

—"The Jacksons! Wizards of Awe for 'Victory Tour' Fans,"

David Remnick, *Washington Post* 09/22/1984

Something else was happening, too, to fuel interest in the classics. The age of relevance was being replaced by an age of fantasy. Computers and high technology were all the rage, and movies like *Star Wars* and *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, with their traditional heroes of light and antagonists of darkness, along with bizarre creatures, were grabbing the minds of young people. "The myths often deal with a hero who is separated from his parents who has to go off to some kind of test, encounters the parents and then returns as a grown-up person. This is what happens in *Star Wars* when [Luke] Skywalker encounters his father Darth Vader," said Coogan. "It's the pattern of the Greek hero. . . . The Greek myths offer a kind of escape from the kind of positivism and rationalism that is in the rest of the students' program. It's a relief for them."

—"Dead Language Very Much Alive:

Latin and the Classics Making a Comeback in U.S. Schools,"

Elsa Walsh, *Washington Post* 07/22/1984

From a distance, it looks like something out of *Star Wars*: a crazy quilt of geometric structures dumped in the middle of a lush, well-tended park. Close up, the mystery deepens: plants grow out of the sides of plastic boxes and cylinders that have been stacked every which way.

—"Circus of Color: The Arboretum's Country Garden,"

Charles Fenyvesi, *Washington Post* 06/07/1984

Warren Moon is so deliberative that Steinberg calls him "Yoda," after the wise character in the *Star Wars* trilogy. But he finally ignored Houston's poor recent records and chose the security of the Oilers' deal.

—"Stars Were Right for Moon's Ascent to \$6 Million Deal,"

Paul Attner, *Washington Post* 02/17/1984

"It was like meeting Jesus. All I could say was, 'Thank you on behalf of my generation. I wouldn't be doing what I'm doing if it wasn't for you.' I based my entire life on using the Force."—Fran Healy of the rock group Travis to the *Toronto Sun*, on recently meeting his idol, *Star Wars* creator George Lucas.

—"Lifeline: The Force is with Rock Group Travis,"
Cesar G. Soriano, *USA Today*

What was the highlight of 2001?

"Meeting George Lucas. I made myself look a complete arse, but it was still cool. We were supporting Dido in America and he came with his daughters. I met him afterwards and I'm a big *Star Wars* fan. I said, 'I've always tried to let my life be guided by the Force,' and he said 'That's nice,' in the most blank way imaginable."

—Fran Healy of Travis, interviewed in *Q* magazine, issue 184

You're in a square, transparent pod underneath the stage at London's Earls Court. The point man is staring at you, waiting for a thumbs-up. . . . If you are ready—if thumbs-ups are exchanged—then seconds later you're cavorting with Madonna in front of 17,598 fans. "It's like going from one world to the next," says guitarist Monte Pittman. "Under the stage it's like a hidden city. It's like something in *Star Wars*. Then you go up and there's just a sea of people screaming."

—"What it Feels Like in a Whirl: Madonna and 'Family' Deal with Acute Labor Pains in Delivering the You-Know-What of All Pop Tours,"
Jeff Gordinier, *Entertainment Weekly* 07/27/2001

[Carson] Daly deals with this level of pop-cultural cluelessness daily. "With somebody like Prince, I might have to say, 'Standing next to me is a guy who has sold over 200 million records worldwide,'" he explains. "This is my childhood, so it's weird. These kids haven't seen *Star Wars*. Nobody had any idea who Chewbacca was."

—"Total' World Domination: EW Dives into the Adolescent Abyss Surrounding MTV's Countdown Phenom, 'Total Request Live,'"
Caroline Kepnes, *Entertainment Weekly* 02/23/2001

Kelly Wiglesworth was born one month after *Star Wars* opened in 1977. And in one of her darkest hours on *Survivor*—that late-series stretch where it seemed like Rich, Sue, and Rudy would swoop down like merciless storm troopers and vote her off—the feisty 22-year-old river guide (who stayed alive with stunning immunity wins) invoked her generation's mythological touchstone. "I feel like Luke Skywalker," she said, conveniently renouncing her alliance with Tagi's shiftest members when they were no longer useful. "I crossed over to the dark side for a moment." A moment? Honey, when would you say you crossed back?

—"Survivor Wrap-Up," *Entertainment Weekly* 09/01/2000

Trust us. Even if your kid has the entire scrolling text from the opening of *Star Wars* memorized, even if he collects coins and stamps, even if he wants to be a CPA, even if all that—if the Xterra is his first car, he's going to be cool.

—The Year 2000 *Esquire* Auto Awards 01/01/2000

REED ROTHCHILD: Have you seen that *Star Wars* movie?

EDDIE ADAMS: Yeah, I've seen it four times.

REED ROTHCHILD: You know, people tell me I kind of look like Han Solo.

—From the film *Boogie Nights*, 1997,
written and directed by Paul Thomas Anderson

"This is storybook stuff," said Cardinal teammate Ron Gant after McGwire's 61st home run. "I mean, there can be movies written about things like this. It's like *Star Wars* with Luke Skywalker. The Force was with Mark McGwire."

—"A Truly Grand Slam," *People* 09/21/1998

POLICEMAN (*questioning Nathan Arizona, whose infant has just been kidnapped*): What did the pajamas look like?

NATHAN ARIZONA: Oh, I don't know, they were jammies! They had Yodas and shit on 'em!

—From the film *Raising Arizona*, 1987,
written by Joel and Ethan Coen, directed by Joel Coen

Actor Adam Goldberg, who plays Private Mellish, one of Tom Hanks's men in *Saving Private Ryan*, says he was a bit apprehensive about meeting director Steven Spielberg. "When I met him, I had already gotten the part, so I basically went in there praying he wouldn't take it away," recalls Goldberg, 27. "Spielberg was playing a Star Wars video game on his computer, and he said, 'I'll be with you in a moment.' So that immediately put me at ease." Goldberg's only regret? "I didn't get to play the *Star Wars* game with him. But I don't know if he allows other people to touch it."

—"Chatter," Chuck Arnold, *People* 08/17/1998

STIFFLER: Ozzy, go long.

Oz runs toward the beach.

JIM (to Stiffler): What are you doing?

STIFFLER: (*preparing to throw a football*): Fishing.

Stiffler deliberately overthrows the ball and Oz falls, stumbling onto a blanket populated by several attractive young women. As Oz sheepishly apologizes, it's clear that the girls are delighted to have met him.

JIM (*in awe*): Amazing.

STIFFLER: The Force is strong in that one.

—From the film *American Pie II*, 2001,
written by Adam Herz, directed by J.B. Rogers

COMMENTATOR MORTON KONDRACKE: I've likened Afghanistan to the meanest bar in the universe in *Star Wars*.

COHOST AND "WEATHER GUY" STEVE DOOCY: Mort, I've been to that bar. They don't serve Wookiees, as I remember.

—"Fox and Friends," *Fox News* 1/4/02

The Force may not be with Enron Corp. these days, but it was implied by the *Star Wars*-related names of some of the fallen energy company's financial vehicles. JEDI LP and Chewco Investments LP, inspired by Chewbacca the faithful Wookiee in the *Star Wars* movies, are among the limited partnerships that have been

associated with Houston-based Enron, which descended into bankruptcy in December. It's unclear who the big *Star Wars* fans were at Enron, but Lucasfilm Ltd. said this week it was an unwilling participant. "Until it surfaced in the [Enron Collapse] press, Lucasfilm was unaware of possible use of our protected trademarks by Enron, and any actual use by Enron of such trademarks was without our permission," Lucasfilm spokeswoman Jeanne Cole said.

—"Lucasfilm Frowns on Enron's *Star Wars*," Associated Press 2/7/2002

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish I could take credit for coming up with the idea for this volume, but in fact this book was the brainchild of Tom Bissell, who was an editor at Henry Holt at the time. While he was casting about for writers, he contacted my friend David Foster Wallace, who demurred—he had only seen *Star Wars* once, in French as it happens (long story), and in any case he was much more of a *Lord of the Rings* man—but who recommended that Tom get in touch with me. For that, I owe many, many thanks to Dave, despite the fact that I couldn't wheedle him into contributing.

When circumstances made it impossible for Tom to do the day-to-day work of putting the book together, he very kindly entrusted that task to me, for which I am very grateful. Tom has since left Holt to pursue his writing muse (his splendid essay on Boba Fett in this book is, I think, a clear validation of his choice), but during all this time I have regarded him as a close collaborator. I would like to say that this book is as much his as it is mine; I can only hope that I was able to live up to his vision of it.

Elizabeth Stein at Holt picked up the ball after Tom left the company, and she has been a joy to work with. Her patience, good humor, and understanding are very much appreciated.

Of course I have to thank each of the contributors. All compilations of this sort come together under trying circumstances; with this book, the circumstances got a little more trying than usual. The events of September 11, 2001, caused a few people who had initially signed on to reconsider, feeling that this was no time to be thinking about *Star Wars*. I respect their decision while regretting their absence from the book. But it makes my gratitude to those who hung in there that much stronger. They (and their various representatives) have been remarkably kind, patient, and diligent, not to mention brilliant and perceptive.

My colleagues at *Premiere* magazine, past and present, are the best group of people one could ever hope to work with, and their companionship and support mean the world to me. Many thanks to editor-in-chief Peter Herbst, who I think of more as a coconspirator than a boss. Respect also to his predecessors: Michael Solomon, always a class act, and my buddy Jim Meigs, who gave me the gig here in the first place. Much love to the delightful Rachel Clarke, the indefatigable Kathy Heintzelman, my editor and home-boy Tom Roston, Susannah "The Wind Beneath My Wings" Gora, Chris Cronis, Cheryl Maday, Victoria Crosby, Jill Bernstein, Andrew Gillings, David Carthas, Leslie Dela Vega, Richard Baker, Christine Cuccuza, and Brooke Hauser. These are people who, no kidding, actually make you want to get out of bed and go to the office in the morning.

West Coast editor Anne Thompson's penetrating interviews with the likes of George Lucas and Brian De Palma saved me a lot of legwork; I'm indebted to her not just for her industry savvy but for her perceptive insights. The rest of the LA office is full of friends who I don't see enough of: Sean M. Smith, Fred Schreurs, Kristin Lootens. My former colleague and very dear friend Howard Karren was great in helping me clarify many of the ideas in my introduction. And another former colleague, the much missed Aimee Agresti, was a real trouper in compiling the miscellany at the close of this book.

A lot of people ask me how someone becomes a movie critic. Hell if I know, but all movie critics, I suppose, start off by talking

about the pictures they've seen with the people they've seen them with. I've been seeing and talking about movies with my friend Joe Failla for more than three decades; with Ron Goldberg for more than two. Their insights inform my introduction; their friendship helped make it possible. In a similar vein, I need to thank Doug Brod, Ed Hulse, Brian Koppelman, David Levien, Stewart Wolpin, Kent Jones, Francesca Doria, Patricia Sener, Beth "the Shermanator" Sherman, Alex Lewin, Christina Lem, and Davitt Sigerson. The chicken parmesan at Kevin St. James in Manhattan was a hearty source of sustenance during the final stages of putting this book together; I should also give a holler to The Whole Sick Crew at the late Finn bar in Carroll Gardens. Several trusted advisers have urged me not to use this page to say anything about my cat, and I can certainly see their point. Nevertheless, said cat, Pinky, is a really good one. Among his salutary qualities is a disinclination to sit on my keyboard. And I would like to thank my family: my parents Allan and Amelia, my sister Kathleen, and my brother Michael. This book's dedicatee, my cousin Mark, died of lymphoma earlier this year; even when I would see him at his weakest, he always asked me how this book was coming along. I really wish he was here to see it.

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WEBSTER YOUNCE saw *Star Wars* five times in 1977. Only the protective innocence and naivete of childhood spared him from the horrors of the *Star Wars Holiday Special* the following year. An editor in New York City, his journalism and criticism have appeared in *Harper's*, *Time Out New York*, *Beliefnet*, and New York Citysearch.

Glenn Kenny is a senior editor and chief film critic for *Premiere* magazine. He lives in Brooklyn.

In 1977, *Star Wars* burst onto our screens and quickly became the cultural phenomenon for an entire generation. Today, as audiences tremble in anticipation for each new episode in the saga, *Star Wars* is still a major cinematic event. The children who watched in 1977 have today grown up to become writers, film-makers and journalists and in this dazzling collection of original essays they explore the massive impact that George Lucas's cinematic space opera has had on the world.

Edited by Glenn Kenny, a senior editor and critic at *Premiere* magazine, this is the first collection of essays of its kind on the *Star Wars* films. Jonathan Lethem writes of the summer he saw *Star Wars* twenty-one times as his mother lay dying of cancer. *New York Times* film critic Elvis Mitchell meditates upon the mysterious figure of Lando Calrissian, and Todd Hanson, head writer of *The Onion*, parades his homemade Jedi costume and struggles to come to terms with Jar Jar Binks. The likes of director Kevin Smith and critic Joe Queenan offer their unique, personal experience and affinity with *Star Wars*; a chance to anatomise, criticise, celebrate, and sometimes simply riff on the prismatic after-effects of an unparalleled international phenomenon.

A classic assemblage of pop writing at its best on a classic series of popular movies at their very best, *A Galaxy Not So Far Away* is a book for everyone who loves the *Star Wars* films and seeks to understand just what it is about these films that has so entranced generations of filmgoers.

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